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The rented earl

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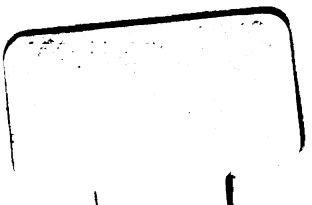




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THE RENTED EARL

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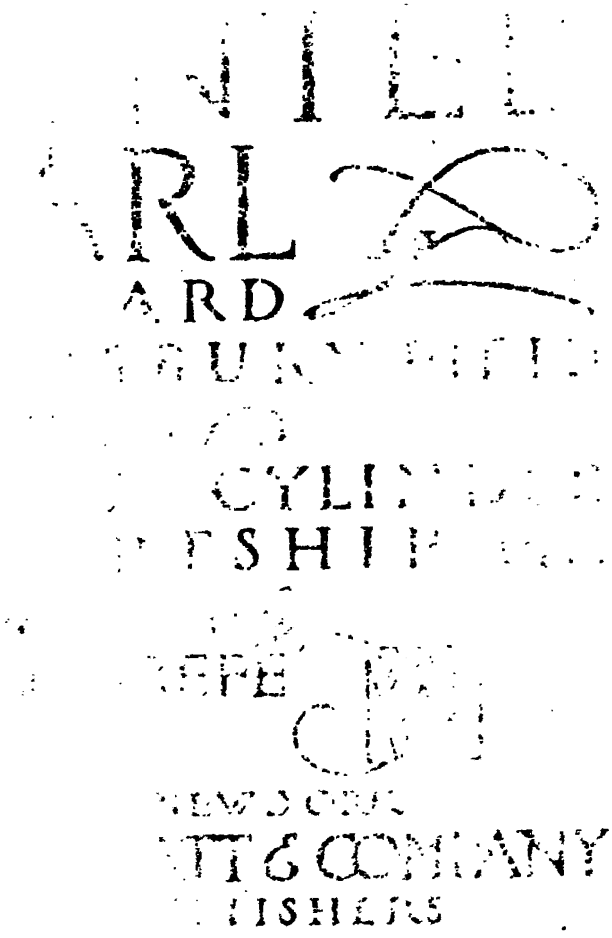
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"NO, I DON'T WANT TEA. WHAT I COVET IS YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION. I'VE NEWS TO TELL."

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The RENTED EARL

EDWARD SALISBURY FIELD

Author of

A SIX CYLINDER COURTSHIP *etc.*

Frontispiece by

WILL GREFÉ



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THE RENTED EARL

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THE RENTED EARL

CHAPTER I

I REMEMBER his being pointed out to me at Monte Carlo. "That," said Gordon Lennox, at whose villa I was stopping, "is the Earl of Carmondale." Afterward, I saw him frequently; dining at Ciro's, in the rooms of the *Cercle Nautique,* a semi-exclusive baccarat club—at the *Tir aux Pigeons,* on the terrace behind the Casino. He must have been about twenty-eight at the time; slender, of medium height, with the drooping shoulders and curious walk that Cambridge men affect. Also, he was notoriously poor; but one thought that

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rather to his credit, for his title, one of the oldest in England, must have been listed in the matrimonial market at a high figure. And he had never married. Indeed, except for a distinguished air of boredom, the Earl of Carmondale seemed to be, and no doubt was, a normal, commonplace young man; and though sometimes seen in the company of Cléro, the famous dancer, whose daring costumes made even the Riviera sit up, his attitude toward her was so patently that of good-natured tolerance that even the most outrageous gossips could see no harm in it.

You will be surprised, perhaps, that I should have had either the time or inclination to notice him. And truly, in a little principality where great ladies rub shoulders with *courtisanes,* where often the only means of telling the one from the other is

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a definite knowledge, where marquis and *maître d'hôtel* watch the same whirling roulette ball from adjoining chairs—one might so easily have ignored his existence. That is, one might who didn't know Beamer. It was through Beamer that my attention became focused on the earl.

I can think of no better way to describe Beamer than as a "wide-awake American"; the man who invented the expression certainly had Beamer in mind. To be a Beamer, it is not enough to say "come in" when Opportunity knocks at your door. Ah, no! A Beamer knocks at the door of Opportunity, and, in event of no answer, forces the lock. He possesses initiative in such quantity that it ceases to be a polite word. He is the kind to weep over a fancied slight, if weeping doesn't interfere with business; the kind to turn up smiling

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after being kicked down-stairs, if business would suffer from a frown—a strange mixture of audacity and timidity, of humility and impudence. All this, of course, is treating him as a type. Concerning Beamer the individual, I can be a bit more definite.

He was not at all imposing in appearance; save for a burning eye, a general air of excitement, and a complexion to make women envious, he was a picture to be skied in life's gallery, and forgot—if he let you. As regards age, he might have been twenty-six, he might have been forty. The strongest evidence I can offer on this point is, if twenty-six, he had no business to be bald, which he most certainly was.

Our acquaintance began in New York. Persistent in his attentions from the first, he had ended by insuring my life for ten

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thousand dollars. I didn't want my life insured; I fought valiantly against it. But when a man spends all his time sitting on your doorstep, or popping round corners to wave mortality statistics in your face, what can one do? Or what won't one do to get rid of him?

I was (I recall it perfectly) sipping a very dark and bitter *apéritif* in front of the Café de Paris, and remarking the skill with which a singularly beautiful woman dripped water into her absinthe, when a hand was laid on my shoulder, and a voice proclaimed: "Well, if this ain't a sight for sore eyes!" Turning, I beheld Beamer. My first impulse was to seek safety in flight, for I had allowed my insurance to lapse, and that Beamer could be in Monte Carlo for any other purpose than to reinsure my life, never occurred to me.

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"Talk of luck; you're just the man I'm looking for."

Shuddering at this ominous postscript to his greeting, I invited him to sit down.

We were both of us silent for a moment; I, because of a desolate feeling that anything I said might be used against me. I managed, however, to summon a waiter without committing myself, and, thus encouraged, I made so bold as to tell Beamer he was looking prosperous. This information seemed to please him.

"Bought 'em in London," he said, indicating his checked clothes. "Picked this stick pin up on Vigo Street; real pearls, and only seven shillings. Now, that's what I call a bargain. Here, have a look at it."

I took the scarf pin and examined it

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gravely. "No end of a bargain," I assured him.

"When it comes to pearls, you can't fool yours truly. Say, the last time you saw me I was chasing life insurance, wasn't I? And here I am swelling about, as good as anybody. It's the limit, ain't it?"

"Then you are—?"

"Sure I am. No more life insurance for Archibald J. Beamer. It's a dub's game, honest. Though I did make some good friends by it," he added ingenuously.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Beamer, divorced from life insurance, might prove harmless, after all.

"This is what I call real handsome of you, Mr. Gatewood," he continued, as a waiter set a glass of lemonade at his elbow. "Too bad you haven't a title; if you had,

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I could put you in the way of making some easy money."

"We can't all be dukes and lords," I said.

"Speaking of lords, reminds me: I want to meet the Earl of Carmondale, and I guess you're the right man to fix it for me."

"But, my dear Beamer!"

"I ain't expecting to get something for nothing, Mr. Gatewood. No, sir; that ain't my style. What do you say to twenty pounds?"

"You are willing to pay twenty pounds for the privilege of meeting the Earl of Carmondale?"

"Twenty to you, yes. I expect ten will turn the trick, though. I've come here on purpose to meet him, and I'll meet him, all right."

I believed him. Still, my curiosity was

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aroused. Why did this round-faced, bald-headed little man care to meet the Earl of Carmondale?

"If you won't do it for money, perhaps you will for friendship," said Beamer.

I shook my head. "I haven't the honor of knowing his lordship," I replied.

"Will you be here long?"

"Another week, I think."

"Then I'll introduce you to him."

I smiled.

"Maybe you think I can't?"

"I'm sure you can."

"Don't you want to meet him?"

"I'd much rather know why you wish to meet him."

"I've a mind to tell you," said Beamer, "a good mind to tell you. This is in confidence, of course."

"Of course," I assented.

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"It's the Star Booking Agency that's after him."

"Theatrical?"

"No; social."

"I don't think I understand."

"That's why I'm telling you. It's a new thing, and, man, there's a fortune in it!"

"For the Earl of Carmondale?"

"No, sir! For Archibald J. Beamer!"

"But where does the earl come in?" I asked.

Beamer took a swallow of lemonade, then tucked his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. "The earl," said he, "is the bearded lady in the sideshow, he's Boscoe under contract, he's a two-spot—yes, that's it, he's a two-spot. And I," he swelled visibly, "I am the other fifty-one cards in the deck."

"Then, you—?"

"I am the Star Booking Agency. You

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see" (he favored me with a wink), "there's lots of people on the other side that would pay a good round price for the privilege of entertaining an earl."

"Am I to understand that you intend to take him to America and rent him out?" I gasped.

"Something of the sort," he admitted. "I'll start him off at Newport about June. I won't get any money for that, but it'll add a new ring to his halo if one of the nobs there has him first; besides, it will show he's the real thing. With the Newport punch in his ticket, the rest will be easy."

"Do you imagine, in a democratic country like ours—?" I began, indignantly.

"That's all right, Mr. Gatewood; America's the grandest country in the world, and the man who says it ain't must answer to Archibald J. Beamer. We're patriotic

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and we're fighters; we can lick our weight in wildcats, by Moses! But the eagle's our emblem, and the eagle, he's an aristocrat. There you have it in a nutshell."

I nodded sorrowfully. I was forced to admit that the Star Booking Agency was, at least, two parts right.

"And now," said Mr. Beamer, "I must get busy. I'm stopping at The Hermitage, and I hope to see a lot of you while I'm here. But I never let friendship interfere with business," he added tactfully. "Good-by. Be good to yourself."

With this parting admonition, he rose, shook hands, then disappeared in the direction of the Casino.

Two days later, while driving to Nice, I passed Beamer. He was in a motor car; by his side sat the Earl of Carmondale.

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CHAPTER II

BEFORE my sister grew accustomed to the dizzy distinction of having married a Puddlestone-Acker, she suffered—or so she maintains—from numerous attacks of vertigo; for a Puddlestone is to Vermont, what a Biddle is to Philadelphia. Can one say more? Of course the Acker in the name was decidedly a step down, but my sister would tell you that, without it, her husband would have been unbearable. Indeed, I have often heard her say: "Stoney, if you don't stop being a Puddlestone, I'll scream!" To do him justice, my brother-in-law, as an Acker, was charming, and my sister having missed no opportunity to clip his wings, his Puddlestone flights

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became less and less frequent. It was distinctly as an Acker that he welcomed me to Puddlestone Hall.

My journey to southern Vermont was the result of a year-old promise. That I had never spent a summer in Porchester, was, if my sister were to be believed, a source of great mortification to her; so, on reaching New York (after leaving Monte Carlo, I had knocked about in England for a month or two) I began preparations to such good purpose that the last week in May found me at Puddlestone Hall.

I soon discovered that Porchester prided itself on being exclusive. And, as a Puddlestone-Acker, my sister, I regret to say, proved past master in aiming social guns at the merely rich. There was, to be sure, an unwritten law against shooting down eligible bachelors—even in Porchester this

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great economic principle was observed. But for all except eligible bachelors, *family* was the Porchester password; without it, the social citadel might not be entered. In a way, this was most refreshing, for, in America, the password is so apt to be: "If you haven't got money, you needn't come around." Still, it had its disadvantages, as you will learn later.

For a man who would rather converse with the ragman than not, to be plumped into a reserved seat near the throne of a miniature kingdom, is, on the whole, upsetting. I was exhibited at the Country Club, introduced to various men—to a baker's dozen of girls and women, approached as a possible candidate for the polo team, and, as a last feather in my cap, was told that Barry Randolph, the most eligible bachelor in Porchester, had taken a

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fancy to me. Rosalie, my sister, was particularly gratified by Randolph's display of friendliness.

"He has money, family, and position," she said, with an air of finality.

"Who was the fat girl?" I asked. (We had just returned from the Country Club.)

"That is Maudie Perkins. I want you to be nice to her."

"Why?"

"She's a sweet girl, and she has two millions."

"I could never be rude to two millions," I said, rising from my chair.

"Where are you going, Dick?"

"I'm not sure," I replied. "I shall either go back to the Country Club and dance the *carmagnole* on the front veranda, or do something equally democratic."

"Are you so bored, dear boy?"

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"No; I'm not exactly bored; but I long for the companionship of the socially obscure."

"Then," said Rosalie, "you had better call on Mrs. Sanderson Burr."

Puddlestone Hall, with its low, oak-beamed ceilings, its ivy-hung walls, its slate roof, and quaint dormer windows, was decidedly picturesque; the formal gardens, the flower-bordered vegetable beds, the straw bee-hives in the orchard, the dove-cote in the stable yard—all spoke most reminiscently of England. There was, too, a little willow-fringed river some three hundred yards from the house. It was toward the river that I turned my steps on leaving Rosalie.

The boat-house contained an electric launch, a skiff, a punt, and a canoe. On such a golden afternoon, there could be but

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one choice; lighting my pipe, I stepped carefully into the canoe. If the sum of its intention had been to loiter, the river could not have chosen a more circuitous course, nor have flowed more gently. But I, being restless, and in no mood for drifting, must ruffle its waters; hugging the west bank, I darted down-stream, rounded a bend at full speed and all but ran into a girl. Indeed, had I not swerved so violently as to upset my own canoe, I should, undoubtedly, have bowled hers over.

You may put my act down to sheer chivalry, for not till I rose, sputtering, and shook the water from my eyes, could I secure a fair look at her. One look, and I stood silent, bewitched. It was my blessed privilege to watch her expression of alarm change to subdued merriment; it was my rare fortune to hear her speak.

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"Ah," she said, "I see you are on bottom."

"On the contrary, I am treading water," I replied.

"Are you sure?"

"Perhaps it's mud," I admitted, "but, if so, it is uncommonly watery mud."

"You might have run me down," she said, severely.

"I'll carry a horn hereafter. That is, I will if you will."

She did not deign to notice this remark; instead, she set about securing my paddle.

"Is there anything more I can do for you?" she asked.

"You are not going to abandon me?"

"If I can be of any use—"

"You can, at least, lend me your moral support."

"I'm not sure you deserve it."

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"If I hadn't upset myself, I should have upset you."

"If you hadn't rounded the bend at such a reckless rate of speed, nobody would have been upset. Still, I do not wish to appear ungrateful."

"But you do!" I declared. "You know very well I have nothing to bale out my canoe with."

"I know very well you couldn't get into your canoe if it were dry. Why don't you take it to the bank?"

"I hate walking through mud," I explained.

"Do you like standing in water up to your shoulders?"

"I almost believe I do."

"In that case, I will leave you."

"Oh, please!" I began. But before I could finish my protest, she was gone.

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Hatless, my hair plastered to my head, I stood gazing after her—a ridiculous, dripping figure.

It was a simple enough task to haul my craft to shore, tip it free of water, and to reëmbark. As I paddled toward the Puddlestone landing, it occurred to me that the enchanting creature in the canoe must be a friend of Rosalie's. I hadn't been introduced to her yet, but of course I would be. Perhaps she was dining at Puddlestone Hall that very evening? I remembered, now, that Rosalie was giving a dinner in my honor.

"I've invited all the people you will want to know," she had said.

Certainly that included the girl in the canoe.

The dinner was a great disappointment; *she* was not there. I had the honor of tak-

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ing in Maudie Perkins, an honor I would have willingly foregone. Rosalie, much distressed over my evident failure to appreciate Maudie, took me to task directly her guests had left.

"I don't mind your being bored to death, but you shouldn't show it. Everybody noticed it."

"Maudie didn't."

"That's because she's so sweet and unsuspicious."

"And dull."

"Maudie isn't dull; she has temperament."

"All that money can buy."

"Dick, you're horrid!"

"I'm not half so horrid as I am disappointed," I said. "Now, if you had invited the prettiest girl in Porchester to your dinner—"

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"Good gracious! Who is she?"

"I don't know."

"I can't imagine whom you mean."

"She has eyes the color of cornflowers, and wonderful brown hair."

"Where did you meet her?"

"I haven't met her—I want to. I saw her on the river this afternoon, in a canoe."

"It couldn't have been Sissy Marquis; she has blue eyes and brown hair, but she's frightened to death of the water."

"This girl looked as if she'd been born in a canoe."

"Then it must have been that Carter girl."

"And who is she, pray?"

"Mrs. Sanderson Burr's niece."

"Ah! The socially obscure lady!"

"She lives across the river in that white

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sepulcher with a tiled roof; she calls it an Italian villa."

"I recognize the house."

"Her husband made his money in soap."

"A good, clean way of making money," I observed.

"And she doesn't know a soul here, and is never likely to," Rosalie continued.

"That's where you're wrong," I said. "If the girl I mean is Mrs. Sanderson Burr's niece, then you and I are going to call on Mrs. Sanderson Burr."

"But, my dear Dick!"

"We are, truly."

"You are absolutely unreasonable."

"I can't see it."

"You mean you won't see it. It is all very well for you to call on whom you will, you don't live here; but if I am nice to this utterly impossible Mrs. Sanderson Burr, I

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shall have to be nice to her after you are gone."

"No woman with such an adorable niece could be altogether impossible," I asserted recklessly.

Rosalie eyed me thoughtfully. "I've never known you to want to meet anybody —man, woman or child. Or girl, either, for that matter. Dick, old man, I believe you're in for it."

I nodded foolishly. "By the Lord Harry," I said, "I believe I am."

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CHAPTER III

THAT it takes more than a mile of pergolas and a tiled roof to make an Italian villa, is an architectural truism; one may even add a row of cypress in tubs, a marble Aphrodite, a carved fountain, and a sun-dial—and still fall short of the ideal. It is another truism that the ideal is rare of attainment. To put it kindly, then, the Villa Paradiso was an unattained ideal, the sort that would have made John Ruskin blow out his seven lamps of architecture and tear his hair. But John Ruskin was dead, and the Villa Paradiso shone resplendent in the morning sun.

Rising at six, I donned my riding clothes, and, after a cup of coffee, cantered off from

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Puddlestone Hall. It was a delicious morning; a veil of mist hung over the river, and the air was sweet with the scent of lilac and apple blossom; I loved each dandelion, each daisy-pattern in the meadow, each drop of dew on the grass—I could have hugged the world to my heart. Instead, I made straight for Mrs. Sanderson Burr's villa, which, as the possible cradle of my hopes (if one could call such an astonishing mass of brick and plaster a cradle), had suddenly become important. The gateway stood temptingly open. It was no part of my plan to turn trespasser, but, surely, only a gardener with an exaggerated sense of duty would be up and about at such an hour. I decided to enter.

The grounds were far more extensive than I had imagined. I came upon a row of maples, a group of fine elms; I reviewed

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a soldierly pergola, whose white columns marched bravely up a hill; I discovered a marble Aphrodite rising classically from the center of a pool (or was she trying to escape from the gold fish?). I wondered if there were sharks in the Ionian Sea.

A shiver of leaves, the stir of birds in a smother of foliage, the music of running water—these are sounds to make a poet's pulses leap, and his heart beat faster. But there is one sound even more delightful; the rustle of a woman's gown. She stepped daintily into the sunlight, the glory of the morning in her eyes.

I dismounted hastily from my horse. "I have," I said, "to apologize for trespassing."

She favored me with a look of mild surprise.

"I had the honor of nearly upsetting your

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canoe yesterday. As for my being here—"

"Pray don't apologize; tourists form part of our daily fare. . . . Oh, dear! Here comes that dreadful little man!" With a nod and a smile, she circled the pool and disappeared.

A moment later, the dreadful little man confronted me with outstretched hand. "Well," said he, "if it ain't my old friend, Mr. Gatewood!"

"Beamer!"

"Yes, sir; Archibald J. Beamer. And mighty glad he is to see you. Shake!"

I shook.

"It's the limit," declared Mr. Beamer, "how little the world is. See you in New York, see you in Monte Carlo, see you in Porchester."

"This is the last place I should have expected to see you. Are you here for long?"

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"Going this afternoon."

"You're looking very well."

"That's right. And when Archibald J. Beamer looks well, he is well. I've been going some since I saw you in Monte Carlo, Mr. Gatewood. I like a touch of high life as well as any man, but I never let it interfere with business—no, sir! If they think by feeding me off of gold plates they can make me come down in my prices, they're mistaken, that's all there is to it."

"I should infer that the Star Booking Agency had succeeded in landing the Earl of Carmondale," I said.

"Sure, I landed him. Got him staked out at Newport. Next week he goes to a brewer's family in Morristown, and after that—it ain't quite settled, but I guess his nibs will do three days' time in the palace up yonder."

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He pointed to the huge frosted-cake of a house on the hill, then winked knowingly. No wonder *she* had called him a dreadful little man.

"Of course, the contract ain't signed yet, but—well, I ain't worrying any."

"I don't believe you ever worry," I said severely.

"That's right; I let the other people do the worrying. But this dealing with women is the very Dickens. Here I am, offering an A No. 1 earl for a thousand dollars a day (dirt cheap, that's what it is) and, would you believe it? they all try to beat me down in my price."

"No wonder; it's preposterous!"

Beamer shook his head. "It ain't as if I was a bargain counter, and the earl was a remnant," he explained. "No, by Jinks! See where he's been staying at Newport;

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read his press notices; look at his family. Why, man, he's the real social flypaper! Lock your doors, and the first families will come buzzing in at your windows. Whoever gets him is *it,* you can take it from me. And in this case, with you as a friend of the family to help things along—"

"But I'm not a friend of the family," I protested.

"Don't care for the old lady, eh? Well, frankly, Mr. Gatewood, I don't blame you; between ourselves, she lacks what I call class. But, say! If her niece ain't as classy a bit of calico as was ever buttoned up the back, I'll eat my hat."

It would have afforded me the deepest pleasure to have made Mr. Beamer eat his hat—and his words. Being, alas, in a woefully false position, the best I could do was to glare at him, and mount my horse.

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Beamer regarded me reproachfully. "Now, don't run off mad," he begged. "I didn't mean anything."

"I dislike very much your manner of alluding to my friends."

"I thought you said they weren't your friends."

"I said nothing of the sort."

Beamer stood silent for a moment, then slapped his leg. "I see just how it is," he roared. "You can count on my being discreet, Mr. Gatewood. The old lady may be looking for something better, but I'm on your side, and Archibald J. Beamer stands by his friends to the last ditch. Remember that."

"You're entirely wrong," I responded hotly.

"Now, now! Don't get huffy! No smoke, no fire—that's what I always say—

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and you're terrible fiery, Mr. Gatewood."

"That," I said, "is the result of taking a ride before breakfast; I am always fiery before breakfast, Beamer. Good-morning."

I cantered towards Puddlestone Hall in a distinctly bad humor. What a little beast Beamer was, with his A No. 1 earls, and his thousand-dollars-a-day prices! What a shame—what an appalling shame—that such a love of a girl should have such a social-climber for an aunt!

She had worn a garden hat trimmed with cornflowers, and a simple gown of virginal white; the picture she made, standing by the pool, lingered in my memory—slight, girlish, graceful, fragrant with youth. And she had favored me with a friendly smile.

It was plain that we must call at the Villa Paradiso that very afternoon, for, be-

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fore long, the whole world would know of Carmondale's contemplated visit. (I counted it as settled, you see) and it would be intolerable to have Mrs. Sanderson Burr believe Rosalie capable of calling out of deference to an expected earl. Rosalie, however, proved difficult.

"I'll go next Friday, or Saturday—or next week," she temporized.

"But I want you to go to-day, this afternoon."

"Don't be unreasonable, Dick. Why, you aren't even sure the girl is her niece!"

"Yes, I am."

"And when did you make this bothersome discovery, pray?"

"Never mind that part. I know what I'm talking about."

"I promised to meet Stoney at the Country Club at five."

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"Then we'll call on Mrs. Sanderson Burr at four."

Rosalie sighed. "It's a dreary position to find oneself in. If I'd known you were so impressionable—"

"I'm not impressionable. Haven't I spent my whole life running away from girls and women?"

"And now, to see you running in the opposite direction— Really, it's too bad of you, Dick. Besides, I had quite set my heart on your making up to Maudie; lots of men have wanted to marry her."

"No doubt," I assented dryly.

"And now to find you bewitched by a pair of brown eyes—"

"Blue eyes," I corrected.

"—when I had quite counted on your marrying Maudie—"

"Don't be absurd."

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"I can't help being absurd when you ask me to do such absurd things."

"There's nothing absurd in a friendly call."

"But I don't feel friendly toward Mrs. Sanderson Burr. Why should she come to live in Porchester where she isn't wanted? Why should she desecrate its prettiest hill with that hideous house of hers? Why should she allow her beautiful niece to go canoeing on the river? Why should she have a beautiful niece at all? Is she really pretty, Dick?"

"Ravishingly pretty."

"And do you think she'll like me?" Rosalie questioned.

"My dear, are you aware that ninety-nine women out of a hundred would have said: 'Do you think I'll like her?'"

"Where you're concerned, I always try

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to hitch my wagon to the hundred mark, Dicky boy."

And that, I think, is one of the sweetest things that any woman ever said to any man.

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CHAPTER IV

"I COULDN'T feel more excited if I were calling on Bluebeard, or Lady Macbeth," said Rosalie, as she stepped from the motor car to the broad terrace in front of the Villa Paradiso.

"I'm frightfully nervous," I confessed.

"You look deevie in your flannels."

"One may look nice, and still feel twittery," I observed. "Do you suppose she'll be at home?"

"Of course she will," said Rosalie with the easy optimism of indifference. "Isn't that a hideous door?"

The door in question was of heavily carved oak, black with recently acquired age. Yet it proved an admirable door in

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one respect: it opened promptly to my ring.

The man in plum-colored livery was plainly impressed by Rosalie's appearance. He was sure Mrs. Sanderson Burr was at home.

"And Miss Carter?" I asked, timidly.

She, no doubt, was at home, too. Would we step this way, please? He left us seated on gilt-and-satin chairs, in an enameled, brocaded room.

"I wonder," said Rosalie when we were alone, "what *Louis* is held responsible for this?"

"Perhaps it is a catholic combination of the three periods," I suggested.

"Three periods and a dash, my dear."

"One might call it *Louis* Chippendale," I ventured, pointing to a cabinet.

"Or *Louis* Verni-Martin," said Rosalie,

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indicating a screen. "No, I have it; it's *Louis d'or.*"

She laughed so heartily over her discovery that I grew uneasy. "Remember," I said, severely, "we didn't come to scoff."

"Goodness, no! And we're not going to remain to pray, either. Fancy, praying in a *Louis d'or* room!"

"In such an extremity, I think one would be justified in addressing one's petitions to the Golden Calf," I responded gravely.

"Hush!" said Rosalie. "Here she comes."

In some previous paragraph I have been guilty of rhapsody to the rustle of a woman's gown. I wish to say, in passing, that the quality of the rustle depends more on the wearer than the material employed. There is no doubt that Mrs. Sanderson Burr rustled; yet the stir of her petticoats reminded

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one of nothing more sentimental than gentlemanly floor-walkers, and silk, linen, and lace at so much a yard.

My first impression was that she looked expensive. I retained this impression from the moment she entered her *Louis d'or* reception room, till she subsided (I use the word advisedly) into a gilt chair, large, blonde, full-bosomed—an elaborately upholstered Juno who had gone a bit to seed. From her manner of sitting, I learned that her stays were very long, very fashionable, and very uncomfortable. I learned, too, that her words took color, chameleon-wise, from her auditor; when Rosalie appeared impressed, she was all assurance; when Rosalie appeared depressed, she grew deprecatory. But, above everything, she was glad to see us.

Pope has said that manner makes the

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man; he might well have added that women make manner. Rosalie was all *noblesse oblige* and great lady; Mrs. Sanderson Burr wrestled with the difficulties of a dual rôle, playing gratified hostess, and *grande dame,* as the occasion required. It was: "I've been meaning to call for weeks" (a white lie). "My brother admires your house so much" (a black lie). "There is a languor peculiar to Italy, I think" (a platitude). And to each in turn, Mrs. Sanderson Burr would reply: "So good of you. Does he, really? I quite agree with you, dear Mrs. Puddlestone-Acker." Ping pong has gone out, but little celluloid balls of conversation such as these still cross and recross the social net. It is very dispiriting, however, to have to sit by and watch such a game, particularly when one's thoughts—and heart—are elsewhere.

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With Rosalie, as with nature, it is all things in their season; the winter of my discontent was an unconscionable time passing. But finally the sun shone, and it was spring. "I understand," said Rosalie, "that you have a beautiful niece. I am disappointed not to have seen her."

"She's somewhere round—in the garden, perhaps. She's always there, or on the river. Frankly, dear Mrs. Acker, I don't know what to make of the child; she is pretty, as you say, but she doesn't care a pin about meeting people."

"The indifference of youth to its advantages is proverbial," I murmured.

"She has only been with me six months. Her father was my brother, a most estimable man, but—" (I gathered that Mrs. Sanderson Burr did not care for estimable

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men). "She will be sorry not to have seen you," she concluded feebly.

"And I shall be sorry if I am not allowed to explore your garden," I said. "May I?"

"Why, certainly, Mr. Gatewood! I'll ring for Thomas, and have him instruct the head gardener—"

"No, no!" I protested. "To be personally conducted, is not to explore. I want to do it on my own, as the English say. Thank you so much." Without waiting for further permission, I flew from that gilded cage of a room, leaving the lettuce and bird seed of social intercourse behind me.

I paused for a moment on the terrace. By turning one's back to the house, one could almost imagine oneself in paradise; the sweet slope of the hill, the silver ribbon of river at its base, the splendid dip of the

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Berkshires, the fairy mountain barrier to the east—how beautiful it all was!

Quitting the terrace, I wandered down a path till I came to a rose trellis; there I found a gardener on a step-ladder, bending to the pleasant task of training a crimson rambler in the way it should ramble.

"Have you seen Miss Carter?" I asked.

"I have," said he. "She's in the apple orchard."

As there was no friendly bee at hand to lead me to the orchard, I trusted to the scent of apple blossoms in the air, and, literally following my nose, crossed an open space, circled a maple grove, clambered over a dry-stone wall, leaped a little brook, and—

The tree under which she sat was old, and gnarled, and fragrant; beside her, on the grass, lay a book bound in green buckram;

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a long-stemmed buttercup marked the page where she had stopped reading; she was eating wild strawberries. I tried to incorporate an air of deference into my approach; I summoned up what I imagined to be a disarming smile.

When she saw me, she stopped eating strawberries, and regarded me with much the same interest she might have bestowed upon a clown stepping into the ring to shout: "Here I am again!" It was most disconcerting. Plunging recklessly into explanation, I floundered through a sea of words: I was Mr. Richard Gatewood.—Mrs. Puddlestone-Acker was my sister.—We had called on Mrs. Sanderson Burr.—I had been sent on a delicate mission—to find a Miss Carter.—I had found her, perhaps. If so, would she accompany me to the house? Or did she prefer to remain

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where she was? In the latter event, my sister would be desolated.—Still, much was to be said in favor of apple orchards.—Personally, I knew nothing more attractive.—Might I sit down?

She was evidently amused; not so much by my monologue as my breathless manner of delivering it.

"Yes, you may sit down," she said. "Why shouldn't you?"

Why, indeed! I was delighted to find that any one capable of looking so deliciously fresh and flower-like could be so reasonable.

"This is the third time I've seen you," she continued with a frankness I thought adorable.

"Being Mrs. Puddlestone-Acker's brother is my one distinction," I said.

"And being Mrs. Sanderson Burr's niece,

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mine. May I offer you a strawberry? I hope you don't mind their being a bit squashy."

"I like my strawberries squashy. Ah, I see you've been reading 'The Beloved Vagabond.'"

"Yes. Isn't he a dear?"

"I'm something of a vagabond, myself," I ventured.

"Perhaps! But you wander about with a cake of soap in your hand, instead of a violin. I'm sure you would never have married Blanquette."

"Rather her than the stupid English lady. Really, Miss Carter, you make me feel as if I'd traded my birthright for a bathtub."

She laughed merrily.

"If I can't play the fiddle, I have, at least, spent my life paying the fiddler," I continued.

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"We all do that."

"A slave to soap may be a slave to sentiment, as well," I argued.

"And serve two masters?"

"Sentiment is a mistress," I explained. "I can be fearfully sentimental."

"Ah, but it is so much easier to be fearfully sentimental than to be a beloved vagabond."

"You mean it is so much easier to be a vagabond than to be beloved," I retorted.

I shall never forget her next words, nor the sweet seriousness with which she uttered them. "I think," she said, "the hardest thing in the world is to be worthy of being beloved." Then, conscious of having bared her heart to a stranger: "I can be fearfully sentimental, too, you see. Aren't the apple blossoms heavenly?"

"They are, indeed! I could sit here for-

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ever. But I don't believe I will," I added hastily, as she started to rise.

"I am going in to meet your sister; it was friendly of her to call."

As I walked beside her through the orchard, feeling singularly unworthy, I remembered that Rosalie had said I looked deevie in my flannels; I hoped it was true. Deevie is an abominable word, but when dejectedly conscious of one's defects, it is helpful to feel some confidence in one's clothes.

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CHAPTER V

ALTHOUGH it had been Rosalie's intention to make a ten-minute call, sheer good nature, a sisterly desire to please me, and a considerable curiosity concerning Miss Carter, had conspired against her; we found her drinking tea on the terrace with Mrs. Sanderson Burr.

Did any man ever see two women he cared for meet for the first time, without experiencing a moment of absolute terror? On such an occasion, the best women that ever lived can be—often are—so cruel to each other. Do they disapprove through instinct? or habit? or choice? Do they show dislike wilfully? Or are they incapable of hiding it? It is for answers to such ques-

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tions as these that one turns to the high heavens above—or to Henry James.

In justice to Rosalie, however, nothing could have been more gracious than her greeting of Miss Carter; she assumed, at once, a charming air of proprietorship. It was: "You must come and see me very soon.—I'm sure we shall have such good times together this summer.—The people of Porchester have nearly bored my poor brother to death; I should be so grateful if you'd help me amuse him."

Mrs. Sanderson Burr, aware for the first time, perhaps, that, in her niece, she had overlooked a valuable social aid, nodded approvingly, in no wise disconcerted that Rosalie's appeal appeared to be directed solely to Miss Carter. "Yes, indeed," she said, "Geraldine and I will be delighted to amuse Mr. Gatewood!"

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So *her* name was Geraldine.

As for my hostess, she had already succeeded in amusing me, for deftly as Rosalie had gone about building her little house of friendship, Mrs. Sanderson Burr had been more deft—she had planted her ladder against the wall before the mortar was dry.

"Well," I said, as we flew toward the Country Club, after making our *adieux,* "what do you think?"

"I think Stoney will be furious with me for being late."

"Bother Stoney!"

"I've bothered him enough already."

"Don't be tiresome. What I want is your opinion of *her.*"

"She's a dear, wild-rose of a girl."

"Not wild," I objected, "just rose."

"But her aunt is a rose, too."

"Nonsense!"

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"A perennial climber."

"Then *she* isn't a rose, at all."

"It takes all sorts of roses to make a garden," Rosalie remarked sagely.

"If you'd only be serious!"

"She's a love, Dick; I mean it. Simple, frank, unaffected—"

"And beautiful?"

"That goes without saying."

"Then you approve?"

"With all my heart."

"You're the sweetest sister in the whole world!" I cried.

Rosalie smiled. "What do you suppose your sweetest sister has undertaken?"

"I can't imagine."

"To act as Mrs. Sanderson Burr's social pilot. She doesn't know it, yet, but—honestly, Dick, what could I do? Here she is, about to become a—"

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"Good heavens!"

"A hostess—"

"Oh!"

"To an earl—a real, live earl. And she's at her wits' end to know what to do with him."

"Why does she have him, then?"

"She can't help it; he's an old friend. And now that he's in America—"

"I see," I said.

"Of course, she'll have to entertain him."

"Of course."

"And one can't entertain without inviting people."

"Some women can't," I amended.

"And she doesn't know anybody to invite to meet him, poor soul, so, naturally, I shall make all the women call on her."

I was silent from sheer indignation. To have one's own sister imposed upon thus

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outrageously! To be forced to sit by and see the imposition carried forward! An old friend, indeed! The Earl of Carmondale was bought and paid for, the bill receipted, the ink scarce dry. If it were not for—for Geraldine— What a dear name! But I mustn't call her that, even to myself. Still, perhaps—

I looked at Rosalie. From the intent gaze with which she favored her lorgnette, I gathered she was busy with plans for forcing reluctant—and, mayhap, recalcitrant—ladies to leave cards at the Villa Paradiso. I looked past Rosalie, through the walls of the villa itself, and beheld Mrs. Sanderson Burr, triumphant and vulgar, patting the rungs of her ladder; I saw Geraldine standing beside her, sick with shame. Or was she aware of her aunt's machinations? I wondered how much she

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knew. Then, to ease my mind, I cursed Beamer, under my breath—Beamer, and his Star Booking Agency, his A No. 1 earl, and, lastly, myself for having allowed him to take me into his confidence that afternoon at Monte Carlo.

That Mrs. Sanderson Burr should impose on Rosalie's good nature—and credulity—was maddening, certainly. Still, it was not for me to throw stones. Besides, what difference if Mrs. Sanderson Burr did enter through the needle's eye into the kingdom of Porchester society? I decided, on reflection, that it made not the slightest difference in the world.

Mrs. Freddy Trenwith, Maudie Perkins and Barry Randolph were having tea together on the veranda of the Country Club when we arrived.

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"Hullo! Come and join us," called Maudie.

"Yes, do!" said Randolph, rising lazily.

"Oh, please!" pleaded Mrs. Trenwith, a quick, darting humming-bird of a woman. "Please, please, pretty please!"

"I'd like to, awfully," said Rosalie, "but I promised to meet Stoney here at five, and I'm fearfully late. Has anybody seen him?"

"He's up-stairs, playing auction with Colonel Venner and Stanley Waring—he and Freddy. I haven't seen you for forty thousand years. Don't you like my new gown?"

"She won it from me," Maudie explained, as Mrs. Trenwith stopped, breathless.

"I didn't."

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"I mean you won the money that paid for it."

"It isn't paid for," Mrs. Trenwith retorted triumphantly.

"She never pays for anything," said Maudie. "Do sit down, you people."

"Shall we?" asked Rosalie.

"Why not?" I returned.

"I don't believe Mr. Gatewood approves of us," complained Maudie.

"Stop teasing my little brother," said Rosalie.

"There's so much of you to approve of, Maudie," sighed Mrs. Trenwith. "I say, Barry, my cigarette-case is empty."

"There, what did I tell you?" said Maudie, as Randolph touched the bell. "She never pays for anything."

A woman's charity may begin at home,

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with the black-hearted heathen in Africa, or in any one of a hundred places, but her curiosity usually begins next door—at least, Mrs. Trenwith's did.

"I've been simply expiring to see the inside of that house," she said, when Rosalie had revealed the astonishing fact of our having called at the Villa Paradiso. "How did you happen to go? What is Mrs. *Quelquechose* like? Do tell me!"

"Why not find out for yourself? Your place adjoins hers."

"Mercy, Rosalie! Have you taken her up?"

"Not exactly. Still, I think you ought to call on her."

"But isn't she fearfully *nouveau riche,* and all that sort of thing?"

"Not a bit. Is she Dick?"

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"Not a bit," I answered, amused to find myself acting as Mrs. Sanderson Burr's champion.

"I'll call if you will," said Maudie.

"One can't be too careful," objected Mrs. Trenwith.

"You can always drop her, you know," said Randolph. "Besides, it would be rather a lark."

"And it would be a kind thing to do," declared Maudie. "Just think how you'd feel if you'd lived here for a whole year, and nobody had called on you."

"Fat people are always so sympathetic," complained Mrs. Trenwith, with a bored air. "For my part, I don't care two straws whether anybody ever calls on Mrs. What's-her-name."

"I shall call to-morrow," said Maudie with decision.

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"Where do I come in?" asked Randolph.

"You go with me."

"And I'll go with Freddy," said Mrs. Trenwith. "It's good discipline to make him go calling; he hates it so. Besides, I'm simply dying to see the inside of that house."

It was after this manner, then, that Mrs. Sanderson Burr's social fate was decided. I wondered what Geraldine would think. Would she approve of Maudie Perkins and Mrs. Trenwith? It was very possible she might consider *them* vulgar. It was, also, very possible that she might consider Barry Randolph handsome. He was, too, confound him!

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CHAPTER VI

"SHE'S vulgar in such a nice way," said Mrs. Trenwith. "Freddy and I called yesterday afternoon. Isn't her house a delirium? And she's going to entertain an earl next week. I say, Rosalie, did you know she was going to have an earl when you asked us to call?"

"If a truthful answer should tend to incriminate or degrade—" Barry Randolph began.

"Of course, she knew it," said Maudie Perkins.

"Then why didn't you tell us?" demanded Mrs. Trenwith.

Rosalie smiled. "I shall follow the ad-

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vice of my counsel, and refuse to answer," she replied. "Didn't you think her niece attractive?"

"Most attractive," said Randolph. "Have you met her, Gatewood?"

"Yes."

"Stunning, isn't she?"

"Er—rather."

"My brother doesn't care for young girls, as a rule," Rosalie explained.

"Lucky you're no longer young, Maudie," said Mrs. Trenwith.

"Ten years younger than you, dear. Twenty-six plus ten—"

"The answer is twenty-eight, my love."

"Mrs. Freddy has been twenty-eight for six years."

"And will be for six more," replied that lady, complacently. "A woman is as old as she looks."

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"As she thinks she looks," Randolph corrected.

"That makes me even younger. Do you suppose Mrs. Sanderson Burr will give a party for her earl?"

"I know she will," said Rosalie. "I'm giving a dinner for her next Wednesday night. Will you come?"

"Delighted."

"And you, Barry?"

"If I may sit next to the niece."

"I'll come without asking," said Maudie. "Whom else will you invite?"

"The usual people."

"What I should like to know," observed Mrs. Trenwith, "is how you happened to take her up?"

"I'll wager anything I could tell you," said Maudie, favoring me with a sly glance

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and a mysterious nod. "But I won't," she added reassuringly.

And to think that I had called Maudie stupid!

. . . . . .

All Porchester was calling on Mrs. Sanderson Burr, and all Porchester wished Rosalie to know it. It became the fashion, then, for victorias and motor cars to stop at Puddlestone Hall on their way home from the Villa Paradiso; for when favors are granted, it is well that the recipient should be informed at once. And was not a call at the Villa Paradiso equivalent to a favor bestowed on the mistress of Puddlestone Hall? This, at least, seemed the general impression. One heard: "Of course I simply called out of loyalty to Mrs. Puddlestone-Acker, who has taken this woman

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up." Or: "If any one else had asked it, I shouldn't have considered going." Or: "Mother absolutely refused to go, at first, but I made her see that we must all stand by dear Rosalie." Who could fail to feel a real affection for a world wherein one may gratify one's curiosity, and prove one's loyalty at the same time?

. . . . . .

I wish I could learn to be more charitable; I am always discovering that people whom I have barely tolerated are more generous, more unselfish, more truly kind than I could ever hope to be.

It took me an unconscionable time to realize that Maudie Perkins wasn't stupid; it seemed stupid to me that she should be so—er—robust, that she should possess two millions, that she should belong to the socially elect, that she should be vulgar at times.

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(As if any but the socially elect could afford to be vulgar!) And—since one is always the last to credit one's own stupidity—it took me even longer to discover it was I who had been stupid. Her single sly glance and mysterious nod must have put me well on the way to this discovery, however, for when she said: "I want you to take tea with me to-morrow afternoon," instead of murmuring regrets, as I should have done the day previous, I accepted with alacrity.

In Porchester, where the horse is still king, this rule applies: One may appear at any function—formal, informal, or formidable (provided said function shall take place between the hours of six A. M. and six P.M.) in one's riding clothes. Following the custom, then, I rode to tea next afternoon mounted on Rocket, a big bay hunter, whose name, so suggestive of pyrotechnic

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qualities, had been bestowed entirely in deference to his having been foaled on a Fourth of July.

The difference between a house and a mansion is that a mansion has a back stair, or so I was once told by a house agent in England. At all events, though I did not see it, I shall take the back stair for granted, and state it as a fact that Maudie dwelt in a mansion—an odd creation of shingle and granite which she had built herself. On this afternoon, it looked most attractive with its red and white striped awnings, its window boxes filled with flowers; and Maudie, standing on the veranda, waving a welcome to me as I cantered up, looked most attractive, too.

Some women are at their best under their own roof-tree; Maudie was one of these. "It was bully of you to come," she said, as

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I joined her on the veranda, after leaving Rocket with a groom. "I want you to meet my two darlings. Here, Peter! Here, Pan! Aren't they loves?" The two ginger-colored dachshunds sat up, side by side, each gravely offering me a paw, which I as gravely accepted.

"That," said Maudie, "is my entire family—except Mrs. Parr, who is supposed to be my companion; she isn't particularly companionable, but she's a dab at housekeeping. Do sit down! Not that chair—take a lazy one. There! Now, let me give you a cigarette. Do you want your tea this minute? Because, if you do, you can't have it. You may have some Scotch, though."

"Perhaps a cigarette will do me till tea-time," I said.

"Don't you like my house?"

"I do, indeed!"

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"I think I'll have a cigarette, too. What's the use of being an orphan, if you can't do as you please? Do you know, I haven't a single relation in the world—or a married one, either. I feel like an incubator chicken sometimes; even my guardian is a trust company."

"You might have been the ward of some snuffy, disagreeable old gentleman."

"Or I might have been bequeathed to a catty aunt who didn't love Peter and Pan. Peter, you rascal, stop licking Mr. Gatewood's boots! I call my place Merrymount, and we endeavor to live up to the name, don't we, Peter? We do everything here but bant." She laughed so heartily at this reference to her size, that I could not help joining her.

"Rosalie has been begging me to go to Marienbad," she continued, "but I hate the

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place. Besides, if I were slim, it wouldn't be me. Pan, you young imp, leave Mr. Gatewood's crop alone!" And so she ran on, gay, inconsequential, talking, as one might say, in patches—a bit of harmless gossip, a whimsical narrative of adventure, an account of Peter's shortcomings, or Pan's misdemeanors—while I sat by, an approving and amused listener. I understood now why my sister was so devoted to Maudie.

A moment later I discovered that I, too, was devoted to her; for, surely, it was no mere accident that, on looking up at the sound of hoofs on the gravel, I should behold Geraldine riding toward us, mounted on a splendid black thoroughbred.

"Will you help her off, while I ring for a groom?" Maudie asked.

Would I?

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I flew down the steps, but, alas, she was too quick for me! Freeing her foot from the stirrup, she slipped to the ground.

"If you'll take the bridle while I fasten up my skirt," she said—

So we had tea together on Maudie's veranda. I blessed Maudie for having invited her—and me; I blessed Geraldine for having accepted, and for looking so adorable in her simple brown habit—I loved her trim little boots. And Geraldine loved Peter and Pan, and Peter and Pan loved Geraldine, and Maudie beamed on us both. It was a gay little party. But best of all, the ride home! Geraldine rode superbly.—I was about to say, like a princess; but that would be hardly fair, for the only princess I ever saw in saddle (it was in Hyde Park) sat her horse abominably.

It was three miles from Merrymount to

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the Villa Paradiso; we took them slowly. Our way led by the river. When were we going canoeing? I might tip over, if alone, but in a canoe that held two— In August there would be water lilies—

We left the river to wind between stone walls, over which friendly apple trees leaned: Did she still haunt the orchard? —still prefer wild strawberries to stupid books?—Did I still fancy myself a vagabond?

We found a world of things to say to each other, Geraldine and I. She was, it seemed, looking forward to Rosalie's dinner party. "It will be the first grown-up dinner I ever went to," she confided. "It was sweet of your sister to ask me."

"You'll be going to all sorts of things before the summer is through," I said.

"And Miss Perkins; I only met her day

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before yesterday, and she invited me to tea. I refused at first, but she was so friendly, and—why, now, I feel as if I'd known her all my life!"

"So do I."

"You're coming to our party?"

"I haven't been asked."

"Oh, but you will be! The earl doesn't arrive till next week."

"Are you interested in his coming?"

"Fearfully! I've never seen an earl."

"He isn't much to look at."

"You've seen him?"

"Only in passing—at Monte Carlo, last winter."

"I can't help being curious about him," she confessed.

Nor could I help wondering how much she knew. Did she really believe the earl to be an old friend of her aunt's? or did she

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think of him as an unusual piece of social furniture, for rent by the day at an exorbitant price? She had met Beamer, for, in my presence, she had called him "that dreadful little man." And so he was a dreadful little man. Still, might not her expression of disapproval apply more to his mission at the Villa Paradiso than to his lack of personal charm?

A senseless occupation, this asking oneself questions! Did any one ever ask himself a question he could answer?

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CHAPTER VII

ALAS for the plans of mice and men! Stoney Acker, my brother-in-law, took it into his silly head to go on a fishing trip the day before the dinner, leaving me to play host, to sit at the head of the table and devote myself to the guest of honor on my right, Geraldine's aunt.

Circumstances having removed my rose-colored spectacles, I looked at Geraldine with a jaundiced eye; she was having far too good a time, it seemed to me. Barry Randolph, on her right side, was disgustingly attentive; Gifford Clausen—one of Porchester's eligibles—on her left, had quite abandoned his partner for her. And but for Stoney Acker's dereliction, I should

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have been sitting beside her! Making the best of a sad situation, I turned to Mrs. Sanderson Burr.

I found her most difficult to talk to till I discovered that I wasn't expected to talk at all; it was for me to listen—and to answer questions. This conversational arrangement had its great advantage; it left me free to glance, as often as I dared, at Geraldine, to adore the poise of her head, the dear slope of her shoulders, the clinging softness of her gown. Geraldine, the radiantly beautiful, whose eyes shone like stars!

Geraldine's aunt shone, too; she was plastered with diamonds. Her gown, an elaborate creation of black lace and gold (Geraldine wore white), must have cost a small fortune.

It is said that Colonel Venner, a singularly ponderous man, resigned his commis-

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sion in the army because the wife of his ranking officer ate her soup—as Barry Randolph put it—with the muffler cut out. He was, it is true, at that time, a mere lieutenant, the rank of colonel being bestowed upon him later in consideration of his having dived, from his favorite chair in his favorite club window, into the muddy waters of the Spanish War. At all events, Colonel Venner was looked upon in Porchester as an epitome of good form; a word from him carried far. And Colonel Venner had pronounced Geraldine charming.

Rosalie was immensely pleased by this verdict, rendered by the colonel in person. "Then you really approve of her?" she asked.

"Aw—yes, dear Mrs. Acker, the young lady—er—Miss Carter—is—aw—um—charming. Let us play bridge."

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In Porchester, the natural corollary to twenty guests at a dinner party, is five tables at bridge afterward. But Geraldine, it seemed, did not play, revealing thereby an attitude towards the more serious things of life which Colonel Venner considered most reprehensible.

"She has never learned," said Mrs. Sanderson Burr.

"Er—aw—most extraordinary!" said Colonel Venner, eying Geraldine with disapproval. "My dear Miss Carter, you owe it to yourself to—um—aw—learn. Let me recommend Elwell."

Now Elwell was to Colonel Venner what the Koran is to a Mohammedan, the Bible to a Presbyterian elder; he quoted Elwell on all occasions. And wo betide the player at the colonel's table who trusted to his card sense rather than to the Elwel-

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lian precept! It might win him the odd, but it wasn't bridge, and the colonel was the first to tell him so.

"Nasty old thing!" said Maudie (she was referring to the colonel). "I believe he prays to Elwell."

"Who is Elwell?" asked Geraldine.

"Elwell, my dear, is the Mary Baker Eddy of bridge. You're not playing, Barry?"

"No," said Barry Randolph, "I'm not playing."

"Then," said Maudie, "let's go up-stairs, we four, and play billiards."

It was a soft, warm night; a night of a slender moon, and a smother of stars. The ivory balls clicked merrily. Maudie was humming a gay little *chansonette*. We sat by an open window, Geraldine and I, looking out on a lilac-scented world.

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"I beg pardon, sir. A telegram for you, sir."

I looked up, and there was Griggs standing at my elbow. Having just returned from Wonderland, I was tempted to shout, "Off with his head!"

"I thought it might be important, sir."

I took the telegram and slipped it into a pocket.

"If there is an answer, I'll ring," I said. "Thank you, Griggs."

"Aren't you going to open your telegram?" Geraldine asked when we were once more alone.

"It isn't important."

"How do you know?"

As a matter of fact, I didn't know.

"I have the old-fashioned dread of telegrams," she continued; "I always connect them with bad news."

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"This one relates to business, no doubt," I replied carelessly.

"But it may be urgent; some one may need you. Would you ignore a cry for help?"

For answer, I rose (we sat in shadow), went over to the light, and opened my telegram. It had been sent from New York at six P. M., and it was now eleven. It read:

Mr. Richard Gatewood, Puddlestone Hall, Porchester, Vt.:

My bread-winner has escaped. Will you come to New York at once and help me find him? If not, a certain family we both know will be down and out socially.

Address, Hotel Breslin.

(*Signed*) BEAMER.

For monumental impudence!— As if the earl's escape could possibly interest me!

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Would I go to New York? Decidedly not! If Mrs. Sanderson Burr's intimate friend, the earl, failed to appear at the Villa Paradiso at the appointed time, then he could fail to appear. I'd be hanged if I'd scour highways and beat hedges in search of him. No; Beamer must flush his own birds. It was bad enough to be in his confidence. And now the dreadful little man was trying to turn me into a confederate! But if he expected me to pot his earl for him, or play retriever, he was jolly well mistaken. I would wire him a scorching answer—later. In the meantime—

"The telegram didn't amount to a row of pins," I said.

"I'm glad it contained no bad news," she replied.

"Barry is a regular wizard to-night," said Maudie, chalking her cue; "he has just

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made a run of seventeen. Why, here is Mrs. Freddy."

"I'm dummy," explained Mrs. Trenwith. "I've come after you, Maudie, to take Mrs. Birmingham's place; she's sixty dollars ahead, so of course she feels too ill to go on. I'd like to shake that woman! By the way, Mrs. Sanderson Burr plays such a ripping game that Colonel Venner has elected himself chairman of the heart-convention, and is making Elwell eyes at her. Come along, Maudie."

"I'm blessed if I will," said Maudie. "I want to talk to Miss Carter. Take Barry."

"Yes, take me," said Randolph.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Trenwith was playing at the table with Mrs. Sanderson Burr and Colonel Venner. How curious she looked! How curious every one looked—a certain strained

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expression about the eyes. I realized for the first time there was such a thing as a bridge face. I realized, too, that Mrs. Sanderson Burr was radiantly happy. She was a success at bridge; she was soon to play hostess to an earl— Or was she? How the women of Porchester would talk if the earl failed her! I found myself feeling distinctly sorry for Geraldine's aunt.

Naturally, a woman with the social bee in her bonnet is bound to get stung, sooner or later. Still, in this case, there was always the chance that Beamer might find the earl. Even if he didn't, Mrs. Sanderson Burr could give her ball; but she would be rather in the position of obtaining guests under false pretenses—it would be distinctly a sad affair. And tongues would wag, cruel things would be said of her, and— By Jove, it was a shame!

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You may write me down a lunatic, or a meddlesome old bachelor (I was thirty-three at the time), but before I bade Geraldine good-night, I had decided to go to New York and help Beamer find his earl.

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CHAPTER VIII

"HALF the fun of having a party is to talk it over with some one after the guests are gone," said Rosalie.

"It was a most successful party, my dear."

"Colonel Venner is quite mad about Mrs. Sanderson Burr; he says she plays bridge like an angel."

"Poor angel!"

"Why, poor angel?"

"I'm afraid she'll fall off her ladder."

"I'm sure she won't."

"The world is full of fallen angels."

"Thanks to you men."

"I don't mean that Mrs. Sanderson Burr will fall into anyone's arms," I explained.

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"I should hope not!"

"We must help her to hold on."

"Goodness, Dick! Are you having a vision? Wasn't there someone in the Bible who saw angels climbing a ladder?"

"That was Jacob. But none of his angels fell off, I believe. By the way, I've got to go to New York to-morrow morning."

"Not really?"

"I'm afraid so. I received a telegram this evening; business, you know."

"But, Dick—"

"Oh, I'll return in a day or two. You haven't even mentioned Miss Carter," I added reproachfully.

"She was adorable. And didn't Maudie look nice in her new gown?"

"Maudie is a love."

"I can't help wishing it were Maudie,

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instead of Miss Carter. You don't know, you can't know, what a dear Maudie is."

"I can guess."

"Well, if you must go to New York, you might buy me a pair of red silk stockings —number eights."

"What on earth?—"

"I'm going as a red rose."

"Oh! The fancy-dress ball?"

"Yes. I've the rose costume I wore at the Bannertons' four years ago, but I've lost my stockings. I'll tell Valentine to give you a sample in the morning."

"A sample of what?"

"Of red chiffon—to match my stockings to."

"Anything else?" I asked, helplessly.

"If you could go to a milliner's, and get me some little red roses for my slippers. Have you a costume for yourself? No?

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Then you'd better order one. Try Weinstock & Company, theatrical tailors, on Broadway, near Valentine's. You have nice legs. Why not go as a troubadour, or something?"

"I shall consider it," I said. "Thanks for your testimonial to my legs."

"I'm horribly sleepy; I think I'll go bye-bye. Good-night, dear. You'll take the nine-o'clock train, I suppose, so I won't see you in the morning. I shall sleep late. And, Dick—"

"Yes."

"Don't forget my red stockings, will you?"

From Porchester, one goes to New York by way of Albany; it is quite a dreadful and tiresome trip. Once at the station, I dispatched a telegram to Beamer advising him of my coming, bought my ticket, se-

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cured a seat in the parlor car, then waited; for it is a Gatewood characteristic (Rosalie shares it with me) to be in the station at least half an hour before train time. I was sitting on a bench, reading the *Porchester Gazette,* when a friendly voice said "good-morning." Looking up, I beheld Maudie.

"You?" I cried, springing to my feet. "Are you going to New York, too?"

"A bore, isn't it? But I have to go."

"At all events, your going makes it far less boresome."

"I'm more than glad to have company."

"So am I."

"It's Mrs. Sanderson Burr's fancy-dress ball that is taking me; I've got to have a costume made. What is Rosalie going to wear?"

"Rosalie? She's to be a red rose, I be-

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lieve. She has her costume, but I've got to match this in silk stockings." I drew the piece of red chiffon from my pocket, and waved it despondently.

"Poor man! Do give it to me."

"Gladly. Number eights, you know."

"Yes, I know. Are you loaded down with other errands of this sort?"

"Only red roses for her slippers."

"I'll buy them, too."

"If you will, I shall love you forever," I exclaimed fervently.

"It's a bargain, then; I shouldn't mind at all being loved by you. But forever is a long time. Hadn't you better make it a fortnight?"

"No; forever," I replied firmly.

The memory of that journey to New York with Maudie is still green and fragrant, for never was there a more delight-

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ful journey! To feel free to say what you will, when you will, to be accorded, ungrudgingly, the sweet privilege of silence, and to care to listen—given these, and you have the foundation for the most blessed of all human relations, true companionship.

One sees, on every hand, men rearing their altars to love on rose-colored sands, women, avid of the sacred flame, lighting green fagots with their eyes; and the altars shift, and the fagots smoke and smolder, then grow cold. As we sped toward New York, I resolved to know Geraldine better, to be sure of our companionship.

"You dine with me to-night. That's understood, isn't it?" I said, as I put Maudie and her maid into a taxi-cab at the Grand Central Station. "May I call for you at a quarter to eight?"

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"Please. At the Colonial Club; I'm putting up there."

"And I'm at the Ritz-Carlton. *A bientôt.*"

"A bientôt."

I stared after the cab till it was lost in the crush of traffic, then, hailing another, was driven rapidly to my hotel. In my mind's eye, I saw Beamer kicking his heels at "The Breslin." Well, he could continue kicking them till I'd had a tubbing and a change. What a wild-goose chase! I stood about as much chance of finding his bounding little earl as I did of being elected president of the United States.

Does one change one's sympathies with one's environment? In Porchester, I had been desolated at the thought of Mrs. Sanderson Burr's disappointment should the earl fail her, but now I found myself al-

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most wishing my noble quarry might escape. Poor beggar! He had gone into this thing with his eyes shut, perhaps? I reviewed the penance he had done, three days of dreariness spent with a brewer's family in Morristown, and was half inclined to feel sorry for him; one should live and let live, it seemed to me, and if Carmondale hadn't escaped, he might have perished from sheer boredom. No doubt he possessed an infinite capacity for being bored, his appearance certainly suggested it; still, brewer's boredom might easily have proved fatal—it sounded fatal. Besides, it was rather a plucky thing to do, to run away. Not that running away was usually so regarded. But it showed he had spirit. And that he had fled from bed, and board, and possibly fifty pounds a day, made his action, considering the mercenary

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motives which must have prompted his bargain with Beamer, seem almost heroic.

I had no difficulty in getting Beamer on the wire. I telephoned him from my room at the hotel, was hailed as his deliverer, and told that as soon as a taxi-cab could accomplish it, he would be with me.

My first impression was that Beamer looked haggard, but a second glance at his round face and pink cheeks convinced me that his pallor was entirely spiritual; it was his assurance that had turned gray. He greeted me, sad-eyed, wringing my hand like a long-lost brother.

"By Moses, I thought you would never come, Mr. Gatewood! These last two days have been hell, sir, simply hell!"

"No trace yet of your recreant bread-winner?"

"No trace, no clue, no nothing! He lit

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out with a Gladstone bag, and his trunks are still at Morristown. And that's not the worst; the people I had him rented out to there paid me for a whole week, in advance, and he only stayed three days, so that puts me four thousand to the bad. Got to dig up, go down into my jeans and dig up!"

"Exactly," I said; "no performance, so you must return the gate receipts. Too bad!"

"I knew you would share my disappointment, Mr. Gatewood," he replied with disarming simplicity. "I guess I know who my friends are, and I guess I appreciate 'em. And now," he continued, brightening a bit, "the thing to do is to catch him."

"Yes," I agreed. "But how? Have you the least idea he's in town?"

"Where else could he be?" Beamer de-

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manded with the New Yorker's ready contempt for the rest of the nation. "Don't you fret; he's here, all right. And we'll catch him, between us, as sure as my name is Archibald J. Beamer," he added, with a touch of his old assurance. "The time to catch him is at night, you see; he'll have dinner somewhere, and then go to a show —a girl show. He's a great one for petticoats. You should have seen him coming over on the boat; he—"

"We'll not go into that," I said. "I presume you have haunted roof garden and restaurant, and inspected hotel registers?"

"Sure, I have. And that's the dope for us; restaurants first, and roof gardens later. What do you say to our making a list? You take Sherry's, and Del's, and Martin's, and I'll take Rector's, and Jack's, and—"

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"But I'm dining out this evening. I shall be about a good bit," I added, as Beamer gazed at me reproachfully; "do a play, perhaps, with supper afterward. And I shall keep my eyes open, of course. Still, even if I were to see your earl, I wouldn't know what to do; I couldn't call a policeman and have him arrested. Frankly, Beamer, as I now view this affair, it seems particularly sordid and—er—unworthy. I'm blessed if I'll stoop to having anything to do with it."

"I guess you've forgot your lady friends up in Porchester, Mr. Gatewood. You ain't doing this for me, you're doing it for them. Where will they be if his nibs turns up missing next Tuesday night? And them giving a fancy-dress ball in his honor. Down and out, sir! Down and out! And why? Because you got stiff-backed at the

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last minute, and wouldn't stoop to pull 'em out of a hole."

"Not another word!" I cried, half-exasperated, half-amused. "I'll stoop, and I'll pull. Only, in heaven's name, what am I to do in case I discover this troublesome earl of yours?"

"That's easy; telephone Jack's, and ask for Carl, the head waiter. I'll keep in touch with him to-night, so, in case you're successful, all you have to do is to put Carl wise. Just tell him the gentleman Archibald J. Beamer is looking for is at Del's, for instance, and he'll get the news to me, all right."

"And you'll come and take charge of him?" I asked anxiously.

"Come? I'll be there with bells!"

"And if he should leave before you arrive?"

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"Then you'll have to follow him."

I saw myself abandoning Maudie, to follow the earl into the night; I heard myself, with the hoarse voice of melodrama, commanding an astonished Jehu not to lose sight of *that cab*. Or should I take Maudie with me? If I did, I should have to confide in her. It wasn't my secret; still, Maudie was surely most discreet. Besides, it would change the whole character of the episode to have her share it with me; together, we might view it in the light of an exciting and laughable adventure.

"Well, sir?"

I turned to Beamer, who was regarding me with expectant eyes.

"It shall be as you suggest," I said.

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CHAPTER IX

IF I had ever called on a favorite niece at a convent, ever sent up my card to a spinster aunt at The Martha Washington, I might have shown more spirit; as it was, when my taxi' set me down in front of the Colonial Club at a quarter to eight, I hesitated before the visitors' door. For the Colonial Club is, as every one knows, a modern club for modern women, and, as a modern man, I was, logically enough, a bit daunted at the thought of entering it alone. So I stood there, gathering courage from the night—it was a brave night—till the door opened, and a woman, tall, statuesque, shrouded in a filmy cloak of lace, swept toward me.

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"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," she said. "I was sure you would be nervous about coming in."

"It seemed such a daring thing to do."

"Yes, I know. I came down early on purpose to save you."

"I'm sorry I'm such a coward, Miss Perkins."

"I shouldn't like a man who could enter a woman's club complacently. Shall we go now?"

I helped her into the taxi'. "We're dining at the Beaux Arts," I said. "Do you mind?"

"I adore it. What a heavenly night!"

It had never occurred to me before that New York was a city of mystery and romance. I wondered vaguely if Maudie shared my discovery. Too bad we were going such a little way! Still— Pleas-

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antly conscious of light and shadow, and half-seen faces of men and women, I looked on the night with smiling eyes.

"It was nice of you to order dinner in advance," said Maudie, inspecting the *menu*. "If there's anything in the world I like, it's *sole au vin blanc*. And I like our table, it is so nicely placed; and I like your roses, and— I like everything to-night— even you, Mr. Gatewood."

"I wish you wouldn't call me Mr. Gatewood," I began glibly.

Was there something in her eyes that made me falter? What beautiful eyes they were! Strange I had never noticed them before. Wonderfully brown, and a little sad, perhaps. It hurt me to think of their seeming even a little sad.

"We are such good friends, you know," I added, lamely.

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"Of course we are; I couldn't bear not to be friends with Rosalie's brother. She is such a love!"

"It is curious Mrs. Sanderson Burr's fancy-dress party should be responsible for this," I said, indicating our table. "You came to town for a costume, I came to town—" I paused; I had suddenly remembered Beamer.

"I came to town on a most—er—peculiar errand," I continued. "Did you ever find a needle in a haystack? But that's purely a question of luck, isn't it? More needles are found by sitting on them than by searching for them, I fancy. Still, I suppose I shall have to do some searching. You see, the particular needle I'm looking for is a man whom I know by sight only, having never spoken two words to him in my life."

"That sounds exciting."

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"It's really more sordid than exciting, I fear; especially since I am at loss to know whether I'm looking for him out of friendship, out of loyalty, or merely because I am, naturally, a busybody."

"I'm sure it is not the last."

"I wish I were sure. The fact remains, it is important he should be found."

"Then," said Maudie, "in all deference to this delicious dinner, and to your delightful self, I must remind you that you are wasting your time."

"Indeed, I'm not!"

"But you are not searching for your needle."

"More needles are found by sitting than by searching," I repeated. "I'm sitting."

"You might compromise by searching as you sit. This place is something of a

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haystack, you know. One, two, three— I can see seven tables perfectly."

"My needle would be dining tête-à-tête, I fancy."

"Have you noticed the people directly behind you—a pretty girl, and a sallow, savage little man with a Kaiser Wilhelm mustache?"

"My needle is neither savage nor sallow," I explained. "He's a broken lily with drooping shoulders and drooping mustache, who seems to look at life through a glass darkly—with one eye, at least. In short, my needle is an effete flower of Albion, a mixed metaphor with a monocle."

"Then I believe I've seen him."

"No doubt," I assented dryly. "One can't drive down Piccadilly without seeing

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dozens of him. He's a distinct type; I've met him over and over again."

"Yes. But I mean to-night—here!"

"Not really?"

"Just as sure as I'm sitting in this chair—when we came in—I noticed him particularly because he was with a woman whom I've seen somewhere before—I can't place her. They had a table in the corner over there."

"By George!" I exclaimed. "Did you notice the color of his hair?"

"It was a sort of sunburned yellow. The woman with him was a foreigner; French, I should say, or Basque. She was talking forty to the dozen. He looked bored, I thought."

"Yes, he would look bored." I stared vacantly at the tablecloth. "I'm think-

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ing," I said apologetically; "that is, I think I'm thinking. Will you pardon me if I make a little excursion into the fields of approximate thought? And may I talk as I go?"

"Please do."

"It is, of course, highly improbable that the man I'm looking for is the man you saw when we came in."

"You can easily determine—"

"True. But there are other things to consider. In the first place, I'm not at all crazy about finding the man I'm looking for—indeed, I'd much rather not; in the second place, if it is he, I must keep an eye on him till help, to be telephoned for, shall arrive; in the third place, how in the deuce can I keep an eye on him without spoiling our dinner?"

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"The dinner must not enter into it at all. As I understand it, you are, in a way, pledged to find this man if you can."

"It's something like that," I admitted.

"Then," declared Maudie with decision, "you must redeem your pledge—now!"

"I'm afraid you're right," I said, rising reluctantly. "I sha'n't be gone long. Wish me luck, won't you?"

"With all my heart. Here's hoping you find him."

"No, no," I protested, "not that! Here's hoping I don't find him."

I hated leaving Maudie alone in a public dining-room; I hated playing house detective, too. A promise, lightly given, and Richard Gatewood, presumably a free agent, had become a mere puppet in the hands of one Archibald J. Beamer. It was a humiliating position, for it proved most

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conclusively, among other things, that I was sadly in need of a guardian. Wearing the harassed air of one called suddenly on matters of grave importance, I made toward the door, turning when almost there to scan the tables on my left.

No, he wasn't there. Good! It was childish of me to have felt so uneasy. Any one with a thimbleful of sense— Confound it all! Alas, Maudie had been right! There, not ten feet away, sat Carmondale, drooping and bored, and there sat the lady, dark and foreign, talking forty to the dozen. With a sigh of resignation that was three parts profane, I now sought the telephone.

"Is this Jack's, on Sixth Avenue?"

"Yes."

"I wish to speak to Carl, the head waiter."

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"He's busy."

"But it is important I should speak to him."

"Well, hold the line."

. . . . . .

"This is Carl."

"You know Archibald J. Beamer?"

"Yes, sir."

"He is looking for a certain man, I believe."

"He is, sir."

"That man is dining at the Beaux Arts. Not down-stairs, you understand, but in the large dining-room on the Sixth Avenue side."

"Thank you, sir. I'll communicate with Mr. Beamer right away."

"Tell him to hurry. I—"

Carl had hung up. Still, I had no reason to believe Beamer wouldn't hurry.

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There was, too, another head waiter to be consulted.

I was quite unknown to this other head waiter whom I now summoned to my side; further, the only letter of introduction I had to offer him was a five-dollar bill; but he accepted the substitute cheerfully, seeming, indeed, to desire my further acquaintance.

"Do you see where I'm looking?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I am looking at the man with the eye-glass, and his companion."

"Yes, sir."

"What I want you to do is to tell me when they are about to leave."

"Very good, sir."

"Also, will you please inform me if a little, bald-headed man with pink cheeks,

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and an air of searching for someone, comes in?"

"Meaning Mr. Beamer, sir?"

I stared at him in amazement. "Good heavens!" I said. "Do you know Beamer?"

"Yes, sir. And I'm keeping an eye on his lordship for him till somebody arrives."

"His lordship?" I gasped.

"The same, sir. There's sixteen of us been looking for him since day before yesterday. I call it luck, my finding him, never having seen him in the flesh, as you might say—only his photograph, and that not doing him justice, if you know wot I mean. You'd have thought that Miss Blanche, wot has manicured him, or Pierce, wot has fetched him ice-water at the St. Regis, or Wilkins, wot knows him like his

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own pocket, being his valet, would have stood the best chance, wouldn't you?"

"I should, indeed," I answered wearily.

So Beamer had imposed upon me. With sixteen sleuths and sleuthesses in the field, he had tried to add me to his list. Sleuth No. 17! Blanche, the manicure, Pierce, the bell boy, Wilkins, the valet—Horrible!

"When his lordship come in to-night," the head waiter continued, "the first thing I says to myself is, 'That's him.' And I sent a message right off to Wilkins, just as Mr. Beamer asked me to. Wot's bothering me now is wot's keeping Wilkins. I'm glad you're here, sir, for if his lordship was to get up and go, I couldn't hold him, could I?"

"Er—what?"

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"I was saying if his lordship was to get up and go, I couldn't hold him, could I?"

"No!" I replied, with more fervor than the occasion demanded, perhaps. "No, I'm hanged if you could!" Then, turning a traitorous back on my erstwhile accomplice, I made straight for the Earl of Carmondale's table.

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CHAPTER X

HAD I not been angry, I doubt if I should have acted as I did; but it is hardly soothing to one's vanity, or temper, to find one has been playing the old game of the cat, the monkey and the roasted chestnut. In this case, though I was the unfortunate cat, it was not too late, thank heaven! to throw the chestnut (Carmondale, of course) back into the fire. With this thought in mind, I made straight for Beamer's earl, and, once at his table, coolly drew up a chair and sat down.

At this unexpected interruption of their tête-à-tête, Carmondale's companion favored me with an inquiring glance, while the earl, screwing his glass into his eye,

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looked me over carefully as if I were some strange, outlandish creature.

Having expected something of the sort, I was not in the least abashed. "Pardon me for intruding," I said, "but you are Lord Carmondale, I believe. My name is Gatewood, Richard Gatewood, and I've taken it upon myself to tell you that a man named Beamer has discovered you are here, and may turn up at any moment; so if you wish to escape him, you had best leave at once."

"Ah!" exclaimed his lordship, "Beamer? Extraordinary chap! What?"

"Yes," I said, "and he's coming here."

"Uncommonly good of you to warn me. Don't want to see Beamer till to-morrow."

"Then," I said, "you'd better leave at once."

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With that I rose and left him, returning to Maudie and my dinner.

"You must have had luck," said Maudie, "or you wouldn't have stayed so long. You found your needle?"

"It was you who found him," I said. "Guess who his companion was."

"I'm sure I've seen her before."

"No doubt. She's Oléro, the dancer."

"Not the great Oléro? Why, of course! I saw her three years ago in Paris."

"This is her first trip to America, I believe. She's dancing on Hammerstein's Roof this week. What do you say we go? I'll have a waiter telephone over to find when she comes on, and then I'll send a messenger boy for tickets."

"I should love it," said Maudie. "Are all your troubles over now?"

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"Yes," I said, "all my troubles are over, for this evening, at least."

I was dying to tell Maudie the whole story from the very beginning, for it would both amaze and delight her, I felt sure; besides, I felt I owed it to her after deserting her so ungallantly in a public dining-room. But of course I couldn't tell her, for Beamer had pledged me to secrecy in the matter. The earl was our secret, Beamer's and mine. I resolved in future to be, if anything, more guarded in receiving confidences than in giving them.

Come to think of it, Beamer might dash up to our table at any moment now, to demand an explanation from me. What had I meant by letting the earl escape? I could picture Maudie's surprise, my own rage and embarrassment; for, after all, it would be difficult to explain; I began to be as

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anxious to avoid meeting Beamer as the earl had been. Swallowing my coffee hastily, I suggested an amendment to our plan of going to see Oléro dance.

"It's too lovely a night to waste on a sordid, smoky roof garden," I said. It would be just my luck to run into Beamer at Hammerstein's. "Let's go for a drive, instead."

"Yes, let's," said Maudie.

I don't know exactly where we went, though I think it was to Van Cortlandt Park. I should have liked to go on forever; and when a man would like to go on forever in a bumpy little taxi-cab, he is either a lunatic, or not alone. Certainly I was not alone, yet I doubt if a dozen words passed between Maudie and myself from the time we left the restaurant till we were almost home. But of what use are words when the night is perfect, and the

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moon rides high in the heavens, a fair shepherdess surrounded by an infinite flock of stars?

The hour hand of the Metropolitan tower clock pointed to eleven when we drew up in front of Maudie's club. "I've had a delightful evening," I said, "and now I've but one wish in the world—that we may lunch together to-morrow."

"I'm sorry," said Maudie, "but I'll be shopping every minute to-morrow, and I'm taking the four o'clock train back to Porchester."

"Then," I said, "I shall hope to see you at the station. Good-night."

Entering my hotel five minutes later, I all but ran into the arms of Beamer. As he was not only the last person in the world I expected to see, but the very last I wished to see, I tried to pass him with a nod. But

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I defy any one to pass Beamer when he doesn't intend to be passed.

"Hold on," he said. "I've been waiting for an hour to see you; I want to thank you for the good turn you did me this evening."

I looked at the little man in amazement.

"I got your message almost immediately, and I reached the Beaux Arts just as the earl was leaving."

"Then," I said, "he didn't escape, after all?"

"No, I got there just in time, thanks to you. I want you to know I appreciate what you did for me, Mr. Gatewood."

"Er—don't mention it," I said. "So you captured your earl. I suppose you'll keep him under lock and key till you ship him to Porchester."

"Not at all," said Beamer. "He's fly-

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ing about loose to-night, but he's given me his word to meet me to-morrow morning at ten o'clock."

"Ah!" I said. "But will he meet you?"

"You can better believe he will. One thing about Carmondale, when he says he'll do a thing, he'll do it."

"A very pleasant attribute," I said.

"Yes. And he's promised to go to Porchester Monday, so your friends up there needn't worry. Give you a pointer, though; you'd better get in your best licks before Monday, for the earl he's a corker, and I shouldn't be surprised but what he made a dead set after that little Miss Carter. She's some class, she is."

"Er—thank you so much," I said. "I'll— Good-night!"

When I entered the elevator, I was boiling with rage at Beamer; when I left it,

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I was smiling. What an extraordinary little man, to be sure! No doubt America is full of Beamers. If so, I pray that I may never meet another.

I was an unconscionable time going to sleep that night, and I should have been glad to sleep late next morning, but Beamer wouldn't let me; that is to say, my telephone rang at eight o'clock. Waking with a start, I bounded out of bed to find Beamer on the wire.

Would I lunch with him that day?

No, I wouldn't.

But the earl was to be there, and no doubt I'd like to meet the earl.

No, I didn't want to meet the earl.

Beamer seemed very disappointed. "I thought you'd like to meet him before he went to Porchester," he said. "Tell you what I'll do; I'll let you have him this

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noon. You can invite some of your friends to meet him if you like."

"But why, in the name of heaven, should I care to invite my friends to meet the bounder?" I roared.

"Well, he's an earl," said Beamer.

"No doubt," I replied, "but I'm not introducing rented earls to my friends."

I shall always remember that day as one of the longest I ever spent, for I had but one errand, to order my costume for Mrs. Sanderson Burr's fancy-dress ball; and as I'd already made up my mind as to what costume I should wear, the ordering took but a few moments. After that, I was free to do as I pleased, but unfortunately, there was nothing pleasing to do. Restless and irritable, I spent most of that day kicking my heels at my club. It was not till Maudie walked into the station about five

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minutes before train time that peace descended upon me.

The trip to Porchester passed like a dream; we were no sooner on the train than off, or so it seemed to me. Maudie was in excellent spirits, I was as gay as a cricket; we chattered away like magpies. And when we reached Porchester, on discovering there was no one at the station to meet me (I had forgotten to wire I was coming), Maudie took me to Puddlestone Hall in her motor. So again I said good-night to her under the stars.

Rosalie, who was on the point of going to bed when I arrived at Puddlestone Hall, greeted me with a sisterly warmth, and a volley of questions. Why hadn't I wired I was coming? How could I expect to be met at the station when I didn't wire? Had I remembered her red stockings, and

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the roses for her slippers? And how had I got home from the station, anyway? "Did you have to walk, poor boy?"

"No," I replied, "I didn't have to walk, and I did buy your stockings. That is to say, Maudie bought them."

"Maudie?"

"Yes. We went to New York together, we came home together; Maudie bought your stockings and roses (they're in my bag) and I came from the station in Maudie's motor. Moreover, I want to tell you, my dear, that Maudie is one of the very nicest people in the whole world."

"As if I didn't know that," said Rosalie. "Now do open up your bag, and let me see those stockings."

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CHAPTER XI

PARAGRAPH from the *Porchester Gazette*:

"The Earl of Carmondale will arrive in Porchester this morning to spend three days at the Villa Paradiso as the guest of Mrs. Sanderson Burr. Needless to say, Society is on the *qui vive* to meet this scion of an ancient aristocracy, and has provided lavish entertainment for Mrs. Sanderson Burr's distinguished guest. To-night, at Puddlestone Hall, Mrs. Puddlestone-Acker will give a dinner in his honor; to-morrow night Mrs. Sanderson Burr's beautiful villa will be the scene of a magnificent fancy-dress ball, followed by supper on the terrace. The Earl of Carmondale is an old friend of Mrs. Sanderson Burr's, having often entertained her at his historic castle in Kent."

I happened upon this remarkable paragraph while at breakfast the following Monday morning. Of course, I knew the

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earl was expected that morning. But would he come? Notwithstanding Beamer's belief in the integrity of his lordship's word, I had my doubts. Yet, on the whole, I rather hoped he would come. Except for its sordid side, the earl's introduction into Porchester society seemed to promise me much secret entertainment; it would be amusing to sit behind the scenes and watch the performance of "The Rented Earl," a comedy written in Monte Carlo, and staged for the first time in Porchester by Mrs. Sanderson Burr. Naturally, I shivered a bit at the thought of Rosalie acting as assistant stage-manager. Still, that couldn't be helped. Besides, I had already decided it mattered little whether Mrs. Sanderson Burr entered Porchester society through the eye of a needle, or through the halo of an earl.

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One thing, however, was clear in my mind; I had washed my hands of Beamer and his earl. Henceforth they could paddle their own canoe, and if they upset, they could drown; not one finger would I raise to help them—not one! So I boasted to myself.

But many boasts have an evil way of coming home to roost. Had I known what was in store for me in connection with Beamer and his earl, I would have left Porchester by the first train. Instead, being ignorant of the dénouement Fate had written into the lines, I was prepared to sit down calmly and watch the play.

Of course, I have reference to "The Rented Earl"; for, to tell the truth, I was, at that time, acting a part in a play of my own, and I pledge you my word I didn't know what to make of it. Was it a trag-

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edy, a comedy, or a farce? It seemed to contain an element of all three.

In the first place, it is tragic, is it not, to believe you've fallen in love, and then discover you haven't? Although every man knows in his heart he is fickle, he hates to admit it, even to himself. It came to me suddenly, the day after I returned from New York, that I was no more in love with Geraldine Carter than I was with last year's almanac. It was a tremendous shock to me. Here I'd dragged Rosalie out of her social orbit, insisted on her being friendly with Mrs. Sanderson Burr, and now that the result I had desired was accomplished, I found myself with no appetite for the fruit of Rosalie's toil. Not that I believed for a moment Geraldine would accept me if I proposed to her. But it was humiliating to have everyone think

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(and everyone did think so by this time) I wanted to marry Geraldine, when I didn't.

As a matter of fact, I didn't want to marry anybody. Mine was a restless spirit. A home, and a wife, and children were all very well, but I preferred to roam through this wonderful world, to meet pleasant people, to see strange sights in strange countries, to be with men. Foolish to ask a man to give all this up for a woman. But enough of such quite unimportant matters.

That the earl did arrive in Porchester on the date advertised, is now a matter of history. To begin with his first public appearance, at Rosalie's dinner: Rosalie, looking like an angel in a wonderful *Callot* gown, greeted the earl graciously, presented him to her guests, and then:

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"Lord Carmondale, my brother, Mr. Gatewood."

"Charmed, I'm sure," said his lordship. "I—er—ah— By Jove!"

"So you remember me?" I said.

"Rather! Deuced queer my meeting you here!"

"Why, Dick!" exclaimed Rosalie. "Have you met Lord Carmondale before?"

"I met him in New York last week," I replied.

"He did me a good turn," declared his lordship.

"Tried to," I amended. "I understand you were captured after all."

"Yes. But I put him off. I say, is he a friend of yours?"

"I've known him for several years," I replied guardedly.

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"Extraordinary chap, Beamer!" said his lordship. "Extraordinary!"

You can imagine my surprise at hearing the earl refer openly to Beamer. In the circumstance I should have thought it would be the last word to pass his lips. I wondered if he accepted my acknowledgment of Beamer's acquaintance as a tacit understanding between us. Did he imagine that, belted or rented, all earls looked alike to me?

"If he only knew what a contemptible figure he cuts in my eyes," I thought, "he wouldn't be so friendly."

At dinner, Rosalie shared the earl with Maudie, and I was placed next to Geraldine. Poor child! She must have found me a difficult dinner companion, for try as I would, I couldn't keep my thoughts off the earl. I wondered if Maudie recog-

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nized him as the man she had described to me the night we dined at the Beaux Arts. What a wonderful night that was! I wished we were dining there to-night. Big dinners were a bore, anyway; the ideal thing was to dine tête-à-tête.

I now turned to Geraldine and asked her opinion of the earl. She thought him charming; he had such nice manners, and such a pleasant voice. Didn't I consider him distinguished-looking?

To do him justice, when you came to study him, the earl did possess a certain distinction. Just at present he looked particularly boyish and likeable; he was talking to Maudie.

Left alone with the men after dinner, the earl sought me out, and, over his coffee and cigarette, asked my advice on a subject which was, he declared, very near his heart.

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"I've always wanted to try my hand at ranching in the States," he said, "and I never believed I could do it till I met Beamer in Monte Carlo last winter. He's making the arrangements now, and when I leave here, I'm going straight to a ranch in Colorado, though Beamer says I mustn't settle on anything till I've seen California. Chap I know has a ranch in British Columbia. Too cold up there, I fancy. Ever been to California?"

Yes, I'd been to California.

"Ever ranched?"

"No."

Texas was a ranching State, he'd heard, but, somehow, Colorado or California appealed to him more. No, not that kind of a ranch. Friend of his owned a lemon ranch somewhere; trees all died, or something. Cattle ranching was his idea—or

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sheep; open country, life in the saddle, and all that sort of thing. No sitting down and watching trees grow; stupid to sit down and watch trees grow. Horses, and dogs, and plenty of elbow room. Too crowded in England. No sport! Nothing to do but chase a bally fox, or shoot birds. Scotland not much better.

"There's Africa," I suggested, "and India."

"Too expensive! Costs a pot of money to go big-game shooting." No, he'd thought it all out, and America was the place.

"And then," I said, "Beamer came along and made it possible."

"Yes," admitted his lordship. "Trying chap at times, Beamer—deucedly trying! —but a good sort in the main. Been visiting some of his friends till he can get away

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to go West with me. Rum people, some of Beamer's friends. Not here, of course."

"Then you like it here?" I asked.

"Rather!" answered his lordship. "Fine old dowager, Mrs. Sanderson Burr, and her niece, Miss Carter, is an out-and-out ripper. Never met a more charming gel —never!"

And so he rambled on. And as he talked, I studied him, and the more I studied him, the more I admired the skill with which he pulled the long-bow; for of course I didn't believe one word he told me. Ranching, indeed! He was over here to be rented out at a thousand dollars a day. On the whole, the earl impressed me as being one of the most likeable, entertaining and accomplished liars I had ever met.

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CHAPTER XII

HAD Mrs. Sanderson Burr bargained with the weather man, as she had bargained with Beamer for his earl, she couldn't have secured a more perfect night for her ball; a soft, alluring night, ruled by a stately moon, and embroidered with pale stars. Rosalie commented upon this as we were leaving Puddlestone Hall in the motor.

"It couldn't be better if it had been made to order," she said, referring to the night. "Have you your masque, Stoney?"

"Yes," replied my brother-in-law, who looked particularly handsome and dashing as a pirate of the Spanish Main. "But

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why the deuce must we wear masques? They're hot!"

"That's my doing," said Rosalie. "It's so much more fun; especially in a little place like this where we all know one another so well. I insisted that we should wear masques till supper time. You'll have a much better time if every one doesn't know who you are."

"How about you?"

"I shall have a far better time. And, Stoney, I want you to understand one thing; you're not to camp on my trail this evening."

"There you have it," said Stoney, addressing me. "Rosalie intends to *flâner* about, and doesn't wish to be bothered with me."

"Of course I shall *flâner* about," said Rosalie. "That's what a *bal masqué* is for, isn't it, Dick?"

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"To be sure," I replied. "On such an occasion, the most demure of women has been known to peacock, and parade, and challenge with her eyes."

"Well, why not?" demanded Rosalie. "It's like amateur theatricals, only better; while it lasts it's a delightful game of make-believe. Besides, Stoney protests too much. Before the evening's over he will have flirted madly with at least a dozen women. As for you, Dick—"

"I shall flirt outrageously with every woman I meet," I declared. "I'm Pierrot to-night; light headed, light hearted, and, I hope, light of foot."

"Isn't it fun?" said Rosalie. "Nobody knows my costume except you, and Stoney, and Maudie."

"By the way," I said, "what is Maudie going to wear?"

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Rosalie laughed.

"Don't you wish you knew?" she replied, with a provoking glance.

The ball-room of the Villa Paradiso was ablaze with light and color; in the musician's gallery a Hungarian orchestra was playing a ravishing waltz. Looking about me, I took in the whole assemblage—a bewildering spectacle. A bishop was dancing with a nautch girl, a Mephisto with a Quakeress; a Spanish Don, a bull fighter, a Chinaman, a cowboy, and a French dandy of a doubtful period whirled past me; I discovered a Queen Elizabeth, a Yama Yama girl, a delightful creature in white tulle trimmed with water lilies whom I decided must be Geraldine—a Madame du Barry, a Topsy. Rosalie was taking the floor with a Tommy Atkins; Stoney stood in a corner talking to a gypsy. I wondered

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where Maudie was. Would I know her when I saw her?

A seductive person in Turkish costume now challenged my attention by inviting me to dance. "Why mourn, Pierrot? If Pierrette is not here, won't an houri do?"

"Take care of the houris, and the minutes will take care of themselves," I answered gallantly, and off we swept in a waltz. The Turkish lady danced beautifully. But where was Maudie?

My next adventure was with a shepherdess, who taxed me with being one of her lost lambs. Naturally, I admitted the charge, and a mad two-step was the result. The shepherdess was a charming creature, no doubt, and I hadn't the least idea who she was. But where was Maudie?

I danced in turn with a beautiful Marsovian, and a kilted Highland lassie who

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rolled her r's; I sat out a dance with Queen Isabella of Spain, and smoked a cigarette with a nun. By this time I had made several discoveries; the Turkish lady with whom I had danced was Mrs. Freddy Trenwith, Mrs. Sanderson Burr was Queen Isabella, and the cowboy, who appeared to be having the time of his life, was the earl. But where was Maudie? Could it be I had seen her, perhaps danced with her, and failed to identify her? This seemed so improbable that I smiled at the thought, then circled the ball-room, looking carefully about me.

For some unknown reason I began to feel a bit lonely and depressed; I wasn't having half as good a time as I had expected to have. No doubt I had outgrown this sort of thing. I'd tried hard to flirt with the Turkish lady, and the shepherdess,

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but one couldn't flirt when one was bored. Yes, that was it; I was bored. Probably my dancing days were over. On the whole, it was just as well. A silly performance at best to go whirling about on a waxed floor. I'd escape to the terrace, and look at the moon.

I made toward the door which opens on the great hall, stopping suddenly as a splendid creature entered on the arm of a jockey, for it needed but a glance to tell me it was Maudie; Maudie in a bewitching costume draped about with a wonderful Spanish shawl, a red rose behind one ear, a high shell comb in her hair—Maudie as Carmen, a vivid, glowing picture that set my heart to beating.

Claiming her attention, I said: "I am Señor Don Pierrot, late of Fontainebleau, but formerly of Seville. Bizet, who set

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you to music, was my friend. May I have the honor of the next dance?"

Maudie nodded her consent.

"I wonder if she imagines I don't know who she is?" I thought. It occurred to me it might be just as well to let her believe I didn't know who she was, so when it came time for our dance, I affected to be mystified.

"I've been trying desperately to have a good time," I said, "but I couldn't until I met you, for, heretofore, I've known who everybody was. I've danced with Miss Geraldine Carter, Miss Maudie Perkins, Mrs. Trenwith, Mrs. Sanderson Burr, and— You see, my idea of a *bal masqué* is that it isn't complete unless one can have a little flirtation, and I can't flirt successfully when I know whom I'm flirting with; it makes me too self-conscious. Suppose we

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have a little flirtation. Would you mind?"

Maudie shook her head.

"I wonder if know you," I said. "I think I must, for otherwise you wouldn't be afraid I'd recognize your voice."

Maudie smiled.

"Yet I feel sure I've never met you, for if I had, I would have fallen in love with you long ago."

Again Maudie smiled. "You possess a silver tongue, Señor Don Pierrot," she said, disguising her voice.

"Yes," I agreed, "a silver tongue, and a heart of gold."

"As to the heart, I'm not so sure. Is the heart yours, by the way?"

"It is yours if you wish it," I replied.

"But is there no Pierrette?"

"Alas," I said, "Pierrette ran off with a *gendarme* twelve moons ago!"

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"And Don José deserted me for a *blanchisseuse.*"

"We must console each other," I said. "Shall we dance?"

The orchestra was playing "Amoureuse," and we floated away. I had never danced with Maudie before! I did not know a woman lived who could dance so wonderfully. When the music stopped, I felt cheated, betrayed.

"I never enjoyed a dance so much in my life," I said, and I meant it.

And then that confounded jockey, who, I discovered afterward, was Barry Randolph, came up and took Maudie away from me. But by hanging about, I managed to dance three times with her before midnight.

At midnight, we unmasqued. It was a moment of much merriment, and, I believe,

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some consternation; for undoubtedly many of the disguises had not been penetrated. Mrs. Freddy Trenwith boasted openly that Colonel Venner, mistaking her for someone else, had tried to kiss her. "But then," said Mrs. Freddy, "one is always kissing the wrong people—that's life. I say, Maudie, why don't you and Mr. Gatewood have supper with Barry and me?"

"That," I said, looking at Maudie, "is an excellent idea. To tell the truth, I had forgotten all about supper. Suppose I go ahead and secure a table." With that, I started off, for I was none too sure that Maudie meant to accept Mrs. Freddy's invitation, and I intended to give her no opportunity to decline it.

I found a table for four in one corner of the terrace, and sitting down, lighted a cigarette. Rosalie drifted by with Hugh

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Clarke; the earl and Geraldine passed me, both in excellent spirits, and plainly much taken up with each other. "That won't do," I thought. "Rented earls shouldn't make love to innocent young girls; it isn't playing the game." And then Maudie came, driving all thought of the earl from my mind.

After supper, I suggested to Maudie that we go for a walk in the garden.

"I should love to," she said; "I'm dying for a cigarette."

So we left the terrace, and proceeding by a winding path with which I was acquainted, made for a little summer-house hidden away in a tangle of honeysuckle.

Neither of us spoke; there was nothing to say, for the night had laid its spell upon us. But it was delightful to escape from the Villa Paradiso, to walk in a garden

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through moonlight and shadow, a garden sweet with the fragrance of sleeping flowers. Time enough for talk when we came to the summer-house. But, alas! when we came to the summer-house, we found it already occupied by Geraldine and the earl. And Geraldine was saying: "Do come in and share this lovely place with us."

"Er—yes, do," said the earl.

Much to my surprise, Maudie accepted this invitation. To make matters worse, soon afterward she walked off with the earl, leaving me with Geraldine. I hated it, and I'm sure Geraldine wasn't any too pleased. What in the world was Maudie thinking of? Could it be she still imagined I was in love with Geraldine, and had done this to give me a chance with her?

Later in the evening I was to receive an-

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other shock. I had quitted the ball-room after frequent unsuccessful attempts to secure a dance with Maudie, and was sitting alone on the terrace, when who should join me but the earl.

"Have a cigarette?" I said, extending my case.

"Er—no, thanks."

"Heavenly night, isn't it?"

"Er—yes. I say, old chap, I didn't know you were sweet on Miss Carter. If I had known, I shouldn't have—I simply wanted to tell you I'm leaving to-morrow."

"But," I said, "I see no reason for your leaving."

"Yes, there's a reason," replied the earl. "I'm—I'm deuced hard hit, Gatewood. Didn't know I was poaching, you understand."

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"My dear man," I said, "you're quite mistaken; I'm not in love with Miss Carter."

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed his lordship. "That's—that's ripping!"

"I will admit—" I began—I said this so that the earl should not doubt the intention of anything Maudie had told him, for I knew, now, Maudie must have told him I was in love with Geraldine—"I will admit that when I first came here I was greatly attracted by Miss Carter, and took no pains to conceal it. But since then I've met—" I stopped suddenly. What was I telling the earl? Was I telling him I'd met someone else, and had fallen in love with her? Well, hadn't I? It came to me suddenly that I'd loved Maudie ever since we'd made that journey together to New York. What an ass I'd been not to

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realize it before! But the earl was waiting for me to continue.

"Er—yes, that's it," I said; "I—I've met someone else. Nevertheless, it was splendid of you to come to me as you did, and I want you to know I appreciate it."

"Oh, that's nothing!" said his lordship. "Couldn't do anything else. *Noblesse oblige,* you know, and all that sort of thing."

I looked at the earl. He was a rented earl, yet his ideas of honor were those of a great gentleman. It seemed anomalous; but in spite of that, in spite of everything, I liked him, and if the time ever came when I could do him a good turn, I'd do it, no matter what it cost.

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CHAPTER XIII

I CAN'T say the knowledge that I was in love with Maudie brought me much comfort during the next few days. While it is wonderful to be in love, it is wonderfully depressing to have the person you adore think you love someone else, and I knew Maudie was convinced I was in love with Geraldine. Of course, I could tell her I wasn't, but if I were to do so, wouldn't she look upon me rather scornfully as a weak creature who didn't know his own mind—and heart?

I felt sure Maudie liked me; I even hoped, in time, to make her love me. But it would be uphill work, for I'd made a series of hideous mistakes. And now all

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Porchester was busy gossiping; I knew it only too well. I also knew what Porchester was saying; it was something like this: "When Dick Gatewood first came here he fell in love with Geraldine Carter, forced his sister to take up Mrs. Sanderson Burr, and now he's sulking, for the earl is cutting him out."

To describe me as sulking was as absurd as it was unfair. Yet I wasn't feeling particularly cheerful. I hated the gossip that coupled my name with Geraldine's; I hated the position in which I found myself; I hated myself. What a fool I'd been! I remembered those haunting lines of Le Gallienne's:

"For, lo, I love a woman this strange way;
To be as dead without her, yet to stay
A stubborn exile from felicity —
Far from her side until the Judgment Day!"

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I wasn't a stubborn exile, I was merely an exile, but the Judgment Day seemed a long way off; it would never come until I could go to Maudie and tell her I loved her.

You may say you can see no reason why I shouldn't have gone straight to Maudie and unburdened my heart. But when one loves, one is apt to make mountains out of mole hills; I felt that Maudie might think I'd turned to her because Geraldine had refused me, and I couldn't have borne that. So I went for long rides, declined all invitations, and avoided the Country Club, with the result that Porchester said I was sulking.

On the fourth day after Mrs. Sanderson Burr's ball, Rosalie got me into a corner and demanded an explanation. "You are

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acting like an idiot!" she said. "There's no reason in the world why you should leave a free field for the earl. I'm sure Geraldine likes you."

"That," I replied, "is as it may be."

"But everybody is talking."

"Let 'em talk."

"I must say I thought you had more spirit, Dick."

"Sorry, but I haven't," I replied. "Is that all?"

"No, that isn't all. The earl is with Geraldine every minute; he came to stay three days; he has already stayed a week, and shows no sign of leaving. If you are to win Geraldine, you've got to do something besides moon about the countryside astride a horse. What are you waiting for, anyway?"

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"I'm waiting for the Judgment Day," I said, "but in the meantime I'm going for a ride. See you at dinner."

As I left the house for the stables, I was conscious of Rosalie staring after me with troubled eyes. Poor Rosalie! I really ought to have confided in her. But I'd had enough of confidences; I'd tried wearing my heart on my sleeve, and the daws had come from miles round to peck at it. From now on I resolved to be the very soul of reticence.

As I approached the stables, I heard wheels on the gravel behind me, and, turning, beheld a shabby surrey drawn by two wretched horses. It would have been a sight to dismiss with a glance had it not been that some one on the back seat of the surrey was waving his arms wildly. Could it be—? I stood still and allowed

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the surrey to overtake me. Yes, there was no doubt of it; the man on the back seat was Beamer.

"Guess I'm not in luck!" said that gentleman, descending from the surrey and wringing my hand. "First bit of luck I've had to-day."

"Er—you wish to see me?"

"You can better believe I want to see you! I've some important matters to talk over with you, Mr. Gatewood."

I sighed. I was hardly in the mood to talk over important matters with Beamer.

"I was just going for a ride," I said.

"Well, you can't go yet. I've simply got to have a talk with you."

"In that case," I said, "suppose we go down to the boat-house."

As we walked together across the lawn, I glanced appraisingly at my companion.

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Somehow, he seemed different from the Beamer I was accustomed to. Ordinarily he radiated self-satisfaction and good humor, but to-day his eyes looked ominous, and his lips grim. I wondered what had happened. Surely something extraordinary must have happened to effect so complete a transformation. "He looks angry," I thought; "I believe he is angry."

Once at the boat-house, Beamer sat down on a bench, drew a long black cigar from his pocket, lighted it, and then said: "Mr. Gatewood, I'm the maddest white man in the thirteen original States."

I smiled; I couldn't help it, for Beamer reminded me of an absurd Cupid—pink and white, and angry, ready to slay with the arrows of his wrath.

"Yes," continued Beamer, "I'm mad

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clean through. It's that darned earl of mine."

This time I laughed aloud. "What's the matter with your darned earl?" I asked.

"Everything's the matter," replied Beamer. "And it ain't funny, either," he added reprovingly.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon for laughing," I said, "but you—you look so fierce, and—"

"You can bet your life I'm fierce!" said Beamer. "I'm mad as a hornet!"

"Or as a hatter," I amended, smiling.

"There you go again," complained Beamer. "Can't you be serious?"

"Is the business that brought you here serious?"

"Foolish question one million and twenty-three. Of course it's serious.

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Didn't I tell you that darned earl of mine has laid down on me again?"

"No, you didn't."

"Well, then, I'll tell you now. He's laid down on me good and hard. He's already overstayed his time four days, and he's just told me he expects to stop here for another week."

"Porchester is a pleasant place," I said.

"But he can't stay! I've got him booked through the West. He's due at Colorado Springs next Sunday, and he won't budge!"

"Well, of course, if he won't budge, he won't," I said.

"He's got to budge. Do I look like a gink who would sit by quietly and lose a thousand dollars a day?"

"No, you don't," I replied truthfully. "But aren't you exaggerating your profits?

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Surely the earl comes in for at least two hundred and fifty of that thousand."

"What the earl gets is my business. The point is, he's got to leave Porchester, and you're the man to help me make him leave."

"Look here, Beamer," I said, "you're an amusing and amazing little man, but there's such a thing as presuming too far. I advise you not to count too much on me."

"Oh, rats!" said Beamer. "You make me tired! Wouldn't it be as much to your advantage as to mine to get the earl out of Porchester?"

"If so, I can't see it," I replied coldly.

"He can't see it," said Beamer, addressing the world at large. "He doesn't know the earl is cutting him out!"

"That will do," I said. "If, as you sug-

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gest, the earl is cutting me out, that's my business, not yours."

"The earl's gone clean batty about Miss Carter."

"I honor him for his good taste."

"He ain't good enough for her."

"Few men are," I replied.

"But I tell you he's got to go West with me."

"Why tell me? I have nothing to do with the earl's affairs, and from now on I intend to have nothing to do with yours."

"Oh, yes, you will!" said Beamer. "You're not through with me yet, not by a long shot. I've just seen Mrs. Sanderson Burr, and I told her straight that if she didn't pay me for the extra days the earl has visited her, I'd make it hot for her."

"You little beast!" I said. "I've a notion to throw you in the river."

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"You just try it," said Beamer. "But, come, what's the use of scrapping? I like you, Mr. Gatewood, I do honestly, and I want you to hear my side of this affair. Here it is in a nutshell. I made two propositions to Mrs. Sanderson Burr. One was that she pay me four thousand dollars, and give the earl to understand she didn't want him to remain as her guest any longer; the other was that she let him stay as long as she liked, provided she'd agree to pay me fifty thousand dollars in case the earl married Miss Carter. That was fair, wasn't it?"

"Fair?" I gasped. "It was outrageous!"

"That's what Mrs. Sanderson Burr said. But just listen to what I said. 'If you don't do one of these two things,' I said, 'I'll sell the whole story to one of the New York papers.'"

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"What story?" I demanded.

"How she rented the earl from me; how she used him as a jimmy to break into society here—the whole works."

"But, man," I cried, "you're insane! If you were to do that, you'd kill the goose that lays your golden eggs!"

"Don't you suppose I know that? But the earl won't be worth a two-bit piece to me if I can't get him West pretty soon to keep the engagements I've booked for him there. Besides, you don't understand me, Mr. Gatewood. When I'm mad I go the limit. I'd kill a hundred geese, and cook 'em, too, rather than be done by a fat old frump like Mrs. Sanderson Burr. I would, so help me Moses!"

"And you would really sell that story to a New York paper?"

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"Would I? You just watch me. It would be one of the biggest stories ever pulled off. I've got photographs of both Miss Carter and Mrs. Sanderson Burr; I've even got the check she gave me—I haven't cashed it yet. Make no mistake; if Mrs. Sanderson Burr doesn't change her mind about paying me what she owes me before five o'clock, I'm off to New York, and you can take it from me, if I do go, there'll be a newspaper to-morrow morning with a story in it that will make your friends wish they'd never been born."

"There's where you're wrong," I said; "nothing like that will happen."

"What are you going to do?"

"Never mind what I'm going to do. Where are you putting up?"

"I'm at the Red Lion Inn."

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"Well, go back there. And don't you dare leave Porchester till you hear from me. Do you understand?"

"Sure, I understand," said Beamer. "You're going to take a hand in the game yourself. I knew you would, or I wouldn't have come to you."

"But there's one thing you don't understand," I said. "If I'm unsuccessful in settling this matter to your satisfaction, and you publish that disgraceful story, I'll give you the worst thrashing you ever had in your life. Now, get out of here. If you don't, by heaven, I'll give you that thrashing now!"

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CHAPTER XIV

NOW, here was a pretty situation; Beamer turned blackmailer (for that is what it amounted to) and threatening to pillory Mrs. Sanderson Burr and Geraldine in the press. Something must be done, and at once. It was after three, and Beamer had only given Mrs. Sanderson Burr till five o'clock to change her mind. A train left for New York at fifteen minutes past five, I remembered. One thing was certain; unless the matter was settled satisfactorily before that time, Beamer should not be allowed to take that train even if I had to detain him by force. Calling a groom, I ordered Rocket saddled, and

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was soon tearing towards the Villa Paradiso on the run; and as I rode I planned—and cursed the day I had ever met Beamer. Infamous little man!

The thing to do, I decided, was to see the earl. Once I had acquainted him with the situation, the situation would, I felt sure, cease to exist; he'd leave Porchester at once, and control Beamer to the extent of making him desist from further persecution of poor Mrs. Sanderson Burr. Somehow, I was convinced the earl would do the right thing. He didn't know, he couldn't know what Beamer had been up to. Yes, that was the way out of the difficulty, to appeal to the earl. But when I arrived at the Villa Paradiso, and asked for the earl, I was told that he and Geraldine had gone for a ride.

"May I use your telephone?" I asked.

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"Certainly, Mr. Gatewood."

I rang up the Country Club. No, the earl was not there.

I now turned to the servant who had let me in. "Please call up the stables," I said, "and see if any one there knows where Lord Carmondale went this afternoon. It is important that I should find him at once."

The servant did as I requested, but, alas! no one at the stables knew where the earl had gone. I glanced at my watch; it was twenty minutes to four, and I must be with Beamer at five. There was nothing for it now but to see Mrs. Sanderson Burr.

Here more difficulties arose. Mrs. Sanderson Burr was in, but begged to be excused, as she was suffering from a severe headache.

"I must see her," I said. "I will go into the library and write her a note."

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It was a difficult note to write; when finished it read as follows:

Dear Mrs. Sanderson Burr:

I was in Monte Carlo last year, and learned, then, of Beamer's arrangements with the earl. Of course I have never breathed a word of this to anyone, and should be the last to come to you at this time if I were not sure I could help you.

I need hardly add that I am prompted in this matter solely by the sincere regard and friendship I feel for both yourself and Miss Carter.

RICHARD GATEWOOD.

This note sealed and dispatched to Mrs. Sanderson Burr, I did some tall thinking. Naturally, I expected little help from Geraldine's aunt. But this much she could do; she could send the earl to me at the Red Lion Inn as soon as he returned from

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his ride. He would probably find me sitting on Beamer in Beamer's room at the inn, but that was a mere detail; the main thing was that I must see the earl before Beamer was allowed to depart from Porchester. Also, what I had to say to Mrs. Sanderson Burr could not help but reassure her. I pictured the black despair that must have fallen upon her, and was sorry for her from the bottom of my heart.

The servant now appeared and informed me that his mistress would be down in a moment. Soon after, Mrs. Sanderson Burr entered the library; she wore a tea-gown of old rose, and I could see that she had been weeping.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Gatewood," she said. "It was kind of you to come to me at this time. I have been very foolish, and am, at present, most unhappy."

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"I think there is no reason for you to be unhappy," I replied.

"Ah, but you don't know!"

"I know everything; I have just seen Beamer."

"Then he has changed his mind?"

"Not yet. But I'm confident he will."

"You don't know him, or you wouldn't say that. He's bent on revenge, now, and nothing will stop him, unless— But I won't be blackmailed! I'm in a frightful position, Mr. Gatewood. The only excuse I can offer for being in such a position is that no woman likes to feel she is an outsider. Had I known what I must endure here in Porchester, I should never have built this house. But I did build it, and I did come here to live; it wasn't till then that I found what a huge mistake I'd made. No one called on me; I was absolutely ig-

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nored. That hurt, for I am naturally a sociable creature, and like to make friends. Then that terrible Beamer came and tempted me, and I ended by renting the earl from him. And now he would blackmail me. I won't be blackmailed! I won't!"

"But you can give the earl to understand his presence here is distasteful to you."

"No. I've thought it all out; I can't do that, either."

"My dear Mrs. Sanderson Burr, that's absurd!"

"It may be absurd, but I can't do it. I like the earl, and I couldn't humiliate him by asking him to leave. After all, he is my guest, and has been for the past four days. Furthermore, I believe he'd be furiously angry if he knew what Beamer was attempting."

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"I believe he'd be angry, too," I said, "and you may rest assured that I will stop at nothing short of murder to keep the article Beamer threatens to publish out of the newspapers. All I ask of you is that you send the earl to me the moment he arrives. I shall be at the Red Lion Inn; probably in Beamer's room."

"What do you mean to do?"

"That," I said, "need not concern you. You can wash your hands of the whole affair; hereafter, I alone am responsible."

"No harm must come to the earl."

"No harm shall come to him if he behaves himself. I am here to look out for you and Miss Carter; the earl must look out for himself. If he behaves like a gentleman, he'll be treated like one."

"He is a gentleman in so many ways."

"That is true," I said. "But please do

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not forget the fact that he isn't a gentleman; he gave up all title to that word when he entered into his agreement with Beamer. He's not a gentleman, he's merely a rented earl."

As I said this I became aware of a startled look on Mrs. Sanderson Burr's face. Following her eyes, I glanced toward the door. There stood Geraldine, pale and slender, her eyes flashing fire. I rose hastily.

"Don't let me disturb you," said Geraldine in a cutting voice. "Please go on with what you were saying."

"I'd finished," I replied.

"Then I think you'd better leave this house."

"Geraldine!"

"Aunt Caroline, will you please tell Mr. Gatewood he is no longer welcome here?"

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"I can't, my dear. What he said about the earl is the truth."

"And I say it's a lie! The Earl of Carmondale is a gentleman, first, last, and always. This afternoon he did me the honor to ask me to marry him, and I was very happy. I came home at once to tell you, and—and—"

"My dear Miss Carter," I said, "if you are engaged to the earl, I have nothing further to say."

"No," said Mrs. Sanderson Burr as I rose to go, "the child must hear the truth. The earl is a rented earl, Geraldine. I rented him myself from a man named Beamer."

"I will not believe it."

"But I tell you it's true. Mr. Gatewood is here to render me a great service. I rented the earl for three days, he has been

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here a week, and to-day Beamer tried to blackmail me, threatening to sell all the facts to a New York newspaper if I did not pay him four thousand dollars more."

"But," said Geraldine, "I know this can't be true. Jack is a poor man; he has almost nothing. We are going to be married and live on my ranch in Colorado."

"If you mean to marry him," replied her aunt, "you must know what sort of man he is."

"I do know. I know he would be incapable of renting himself out." She laughed scornfully.

"Did the earl return when you did?" I asked.

"Yes. He's gone to his room to change."

"Then," I said, "suppose we send for him."

"Very well," replied Geraldine, "I'll

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send for him. But I warn you you will find it a different matter to repeat your lies to him. And I shall insist on your repeating them—every word." With this she crossed the room and touched a bell.

Mrs. Sanderson Burr gazed after her sorrowfully. "Ah, if I'd only known!" she said. "If I'd only known!"

"I do know, Aunt Caroline. I have nothing to fear."

She made a beautiful picture, standing there, so straight, and young, and resolute. To think that a bounder of an earl could inspire such trust! In another moment her castle in the air would come tumbling about her ears, and life would seem very desolate indeed. My heart bled for Geraldine.

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CHAPTER XV

WE waited for the earl in silence, Geraldine white and resolute, Mrs. Sanderson Burr resolute and depressed. As for myself, I was most unhappy. Why must I be included in this tragedy?—for it was a tragedy. "The Rented Earl," staged as a farce-comedy, had taken an unexpected turn. And now for the dénouement.

Poor Geraldine! Soon her world would be empty, her idol turned to dust. I meant to be fair, but I burned with resentment toward the earl. He was as bad as Beamer. Worse! Beamer had but tried to walk off with Mrs. Sanderson Burr's pock-

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etbook; the earl had stolen Geraldine's heart.

Of course, Geraldine might prove what the world calls "sensible"; she might be willing to marry a man who had rented himself out to her aunt. But, somehow, I couldn't believe she would prove "sensible" where her affections were engaged. No, she would be deeply wounded, and carry a scar for many and many a day.

Gayly, with a smile on his lips, the earl entered the library, bowed to Mrs. Sanderson Burr, nodded to me, then went straight to Geraldine, who was standing by the fireplace.

"You sent for me?" he asked.

"Yes," she murmured.

"How are you, Gatewood? Glad to see you."

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The earl now crossed the room and extended his hand.

"Not now," I said, putting my right hand behind me.

A look of wonder passed over his lordship's face. Then, screwing his monocle into his eye, he favored me with a benumbing stare. "Oh," he said, "it's like that, is it?"

"Yes," I replied, "it's like that."

"Don't mind him, Jack," said Geraldine. "He is going to leave this house in a few minutes, never to return. I sent for you because Mr. Gatewood has laid an extraordinary charge against you, a charge so foolish that it would be funny if it weren't insulting. Mr. Gatewood declares you were rented to my aunt at so much a day."

"What?"

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"Mr. Gatewood charges you with renting yourself out to people."

"Oh, I say," exclaimed his lordship, "this is a rum go! Is it a joke, or something?"

"No," I replied, "it isn't a joke."

"Then it's a lie, a thumping lie!"

"That's what I told Mr. Gatewood."

"You're a good actor, Carmondale," I said, "but you might as well realize that acting will not help you."

"I may or may not be a good actor," replied his lordship, "but I am a gentleman, and what you say is both grotesque and untrue."

"I'm sorry to disagree with you," said Mrs. Sanderson Burr. "I should know if anyone does, for I rented you myself."

"You? You rented *me?* My dear Geraldine, your aunt is insane!"

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"I think I must have been insane to rent you," replied Mrs. Sanderson Burr, "but I did; I rented you from your manager, Beamer, and paid a thousand dollars a day for you."

"Rented me from Beamer? Impossible!"

"You dare question Mrs. Sanderson Burr's word?"

"I—er—I don't know," responded the earl. "It—it seems incredible. Why should I be rented out?"

"It is characteristic of this glorious and democratic country," I said, "that earls and other titled creatures are in immense demand. Indeed, the demand so far exceeds the supply that an earl who is willing to rent himself out by the day can command almost any price."

"I see," said the earl. "But how could

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Beamer rent me out without my knowing it?"

"If you ask me, I don't believe he could," I replied.

"He could because he did," declared Geraldine.

"This is nonsense," I said, addressing the earl. "Why don't you own up?"

The earl ignored my question completely. "I give you my word of honor I had no idea of this," he said, turning to Geraldine.

"I knew you hadn't, dear."

"My niece may be convinced, but I am far from convinced," said Mrs. Sanderson Burr.

"But, hang it all, this is utter rot! I met Beamer in Monte Carlo last winter."

"I know you did," I said. "I was there. Not only that, but Beamer told me he meant

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to bring you over here and rent you out before he'd even met you."

"Oh, come," exclaimed his lordship, "that's a bit too thick!"

"You doubt my word?" I demanded.

"Yes, since you ask me," replied his lordship coolly.

"So do I," said Geraldine.

"This is most unfortunate," murmured Mrs. Sanderson Burr.

"It may or may not be unfortunate," I declared. "But one thing is plain; either the earl is a scoundrel, or else I am."

"I am certainly not a scoundrel," said the earl.

"No more am I," I responded hotly.

"Prove it," said Geraldine.

That I was surprised at the sudden turn the affair had taken, was to put it mildly; I was thoroughly exasperated. "You ask

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for proof," I said, looking straight at Geraldine. "Very well, you shall have it. Mrs. Sanderson Burr, may I borrow your motor?"

"Yes, but—"

"Oh, I shall tell you what use I mean to put it to," I said. "I intend to go to the Red Lion Inn, and get Beamer."

"What?" exclaimed his lordship. "Is Beamer in Porchester?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Then go and get him, by all means."

"May I be assured you will remain here till I return with him?" I asked.

This question proved too much for the earl. "Confound you, Gatewood!" he cried, taking a step toward me.

"Don't mind him, dear," said Geraldine. "I think I understand why he is so vindictive."

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I knew at once what Geraldine meant; she imagined I was jealous of the earl. I could have laughed aloud. Instead, I prevailed upon Mrs. Sanderson Burr to order her motor sent round at once. Five minutes later, I was on my way to the Red Lion Inn.

I found Beamer in his room, his bag packed, all ready to take the five-o'clock train.

"Hullo!" he said, as he opened the door in answer to my knock. "I kinda thought I'd see you before I left town. Any news from the castle on the hill?"

"Yes," I replied. "I want you to go there with me now, and talk things over."

"Nix on the talk thing," said Beamer. "Money is what I'm after."

"Still, I think you'd better come with me," I said. "Mrs. Sanderson Burr sent

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her motor down on purpose to fetch you."

"Then she's changed her mind?"

"Yes, in a way."

"You mean she'll come through with the coin?"

"She has decided that the article you propose to sell to a New York paper must not be published," I replied.

"Well, if she's decided that, the rest should be easy. All right, I'll go."

We made the trip in silence. From the contented expression on Beamer's face, I hadn't a doubt but that he was planning how he would spend the money he was to receive from Mrs. Sanderson Burr. As for myself, I was wondering if the earl could possibly escape the snare I'd laid for him; it would be quite another matter to

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explain Beamer with Beamer present. I smiled, I fear a bit vindictively. It was all very well to feel sorry for Geraldine, but just at present I was sympathizing with myself. I had been placed in a horrid position; the honesty of my intentions had been challenged, my word disputed. But just wait till Geraldine heard what Beamer had to say!

The door from the terrace was open, and we entered the Villa Paradiso without ceremony. "This way," I said, and leading Beamer to the library, stepped aside for him to enter, then entered myself, closing the door behind me.

"Now," I said, "we'll have some explanations. I believe, Beamer, you have the honor of Lord Carmondale's acquaintance."

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"Yes," said Beamer, favoring me with a murderous glance, "but I came here to have a talk with Mrs. Sanderson Burr."

"You are mistaken, my dear Beamer," I replied gravely; "you came here to tell Lord Carmondale a few things which he seems to have forgotten."

"Yes," said the earl. "What the devil did you mean by renting me out?"

"But that was our arrangement, my lord."

"You lie! We had no such arrangement! When I came to America with you it was with the understanding that you were to set me up with a ranch to be run on shares."

"Your lordship is mistaken."

"I'm not mistaken, you little blackguard, and you know it!"

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Beamer shrugged his shoulders. "Have it your own way," he said.

Whether it was his manner of shrugging his shoulders, or the expression of his face, I can't say, but something told me Beamer was lying. It would be to his advantage to lie—tremendously! If he admitted renting the earl without the earl's knowledge, he could be forced to return all the money he had received from the various people whom he had victimized. I looked at the earl, then at Beamer; I remembered how honorably the earl had acted when he'd imagined I was in love with Geraldine. I was about to ask Beamer a question, when Geraldine took a hand in the game.

"Please tell us, Mr. Beamer, your version of the affair."

"Why, it was like this, Miss Carter. I

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met the earl at Monte Carlo last winter, as Mr. Gatewood knows, and I offered him the chance of coming over here and picking up some easy money. He jumped at the chance, and I've been renting him out ever since. You have only to ask your aunt; she knows."

"That will do. Now, Jack, tell us your version."

"I've already told it," said the earl. "I came to the States to go in for ranching; Beamer promised to set me up with a ranch out West, and let me run it on shares."

"But you didn't go West."

"No. When we arrived in New York, Beamer discovered business that would keep him in the East for a few weeks."

"So you made some visits."

"Yes, I visited some of Beamer's friends, if that's what you mean."

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"Did you think, for instance, that Aunt Caroline was one of Mr. Beamer's friends?"

"He told me she was, and she invited me to visit her."

"Yes, that's true," said Mrs. Sanderson Burr. "At Mr. Beamer's suggestion, I wrote to the earl, and invited him to pay me a visit. But it was understood that he was to leave at the end of three days."

"Indeed, I didn't know that!" said the earl. "I'm no end of sorry if I've overstayed my welcome."

"Overstayed it by four thousand dollars' worth," I said. "Beamer has been trying to collect that amount from your hostess."

"Is that the truth?" demanded the earl, turning to Mrs. Sanderson Burr.

"Yes. Not only that, but he has threatened to make a scandal if I do not meet his demands."

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"But this is horrible! I shall, of course, leave your house at once."

"No, you won't," said Geraldine.

"I must. I know this is neither the time nor the place to say it, but I love your niece, Mrs. Sanderson Burr, and I mean to marry her. But the very first thing I do will be to force Beamer to return every penny he received from you."

"Oh, you will, will you?" said Beamer.

"Yes," replied the earl, "I most decidedly will."

"You'd better not," threatened Beamer. "Think of the scandal!"

"There will be no scandal," I said. "If there is, a warrant will be sworn out against you for obtaining money under false pretenses."

"H'm!" said Beamer. "I guess you've got me there. But between you and me,

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it would be pretty mean, wouldn't it? if any of you were to carry tales to the people that have already rented the earl. You can count on their never telling; it ain't the kind of thing people tell on themselves."

"What? Do you think I'm going to let those people believe I was a party to your renting me out?" demanded the earl.

"You'd better," said Beamer. "The story is bound to leak out and get into the newspapers if you don't. What I say is, let's be friends, and leave sleeping dogs lie. Maybe I did play it kind of low-down on you, but Jumping Cats! that's no reason why the whole world should know all about it."

"I think Beamer is right," I said.

"I'm sure of it," said Mrs. Sanderson Burr.

"You can count on my never breathing it

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to a soul," continued Beamer. "Give you my word of honor."

The sight of the unscrupulous Beamer solemnly pledging his word of honor proved too much for us; none of us could refrain from smiling.

"There!" said Beamer. "Glad to see you all cheerful again. Hope your lordship will be happy. Same to you, Miss Carter. Regards, Mrs. Sanderson Burr." With this, the amazing little man walked coolly from the library.

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed the earl. "There's cheek, if you like. Shall we go after him, Gatewood?"

"No," said Geraldine, "you're both to remain here."

"But he's walked off with Mrs. Sanderson Burr's check for three thousand dollars," I objected.

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"Let him keep it. To have things turn out as they did is worth ten times the amount."

"I hate to let Beamer walk off with all that money," I said. "Ah, I have it; you can telephone to your bank and stop payment on the check."

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Sanderson Burr, "I can do that." But, somehow, I don't believe she did.

"And now," I said, "I must apologize to you, Carmondale. I hope you'll understand that I acted from the best of motives, and beg you'll forgive me for believing, even for a minute, that you were capable of the conduct I attributed to you."

"My dear follow, not another word," said the earl.

"And you?" I asked, turning to Geraldine.

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"I—I don't know."

"Remember, Geraldine, he came to me when I was in trouble, and tried to help me."

"Yes, Aunt Caroline."

"I say, Geraldine, aren't we too happy to send a good chap like Gatewood away without thanking him for what he tried to do?"

"Yes," replied Geraldine, "we are. Thank you, Mr. Gatewood."

She gave me her hand, and with it, as I was to learn later, her forgiveness.

"I'm very grateful," I said. "I've made a sad mess of things, and—and— I must be going now. Good-afternoon."

"I'll go with you as far as the terrace," said Mrs. Sanderson Burr.

We left Geraldine and the earl alone in the library.

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CHAPTER XVI

I RODE away from the Villa Paradiso with much the same feeling that one leaves a theater after witnessing an interesting play, for, with the exit of the friend of the family and the intriguing aunt, the curtain had been rung down on the last act of "The Rented Earl." Though unusual in some respects, it had proved but a conventional comedy, after all; the villain had been properly foiled, virtue had triumphed, and the hero and heroine would now marry and live happily ever after, or at least one supposed they would. Also, the intriguing aunt would fare astonishingly well. A real, live earl for a nephew-in-law! Not

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a bad return for an investment of three thousand dollars.

On the whole, then, Beamer had turned out to be a philanthropist in disguise. Finding the ship of Mrs. Sanderson Burr's social fortunes on the rocks of Porchester's disdain, he had, using the earl as a cable, warped it into the harbor of Porchester's esteem; and now, unless she tried to carry too much sail, his late client was safe for a prosperous voyage to the isles of social prominence. Yes, decidedly, Beamer had proved useful to her.

In a way, he had been useful to me, too. If he hadn't rented the earl to Mrs. Sanderson Burr, there wouldn't have been any fancy-dress ball, and then— Well, then Maudie and I wouldn't have made the journey to New York together. A happy

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thought came to me. Why shouldn't I ride over to Merrymount, and tell Maudie of Geraldine's engagement to the earl? What better opportunity could I find to convince her that I wasn't in love with Geraldine? By George, I'd do it! So instead of riding on to Puddlestone Hall, I turned into the River Road, and cantered toward Merrymount.

I found Maudie seated in a wicker chair on her veranda, reading a garden book.

"Pray don't get up," I said, as she rose to greet me.

She smiled. "I have been reading a book on bulbs," she said. "What have you been doing?"

"Oh, I've been doing all sorts of things! But nothing so pleasant as this."

"You'll have tea?"

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"No, I don't want tea. What I covet is your undivided attention; I've news to tell."

"News? I didn't know anything ever happened in Porchester."

"Something happened this afternoon. The earl proposed to Geraldine Carter, and was accepted."

"I—I'm sorry."

"Why should you be sorry?"

"If you don't know, I sha'n't tell you," Maudie replied. "Do you happen to be interested in bulbs, Mr. Gatewood? This book says—"

"Bother what the book says! I want to know why you're sorry."

"Because— But this is absurd!"

"No, it isn't. I insist on knowing why you are sorry."

"If you must know, I'm sorry for you."

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"So you thought me in love with Geraldine Carter?"

"I knew you were."

"I wasn't, and I'm not," I replied. "If you really wish to know whom I'm in love with, I'll tell you. I'm in love with—"

"Never mind," interrupted Maudie hastily.

"I'm in love with *you,*" I said. "Yes, I am," I continued, as she made a gesture of protest. "I'm in love with *you,* and if you'd be so good as to look at me, you'd see I was telling the truth."

"But I thought—"

"So did Rosalie, so did everybody; but that doesn't alter the fact. I love *you.*"

"Well," said Maudie, "if you really mean it, I think I could find it in my heart to ask you to stay to dinner."

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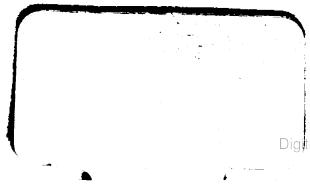
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